Akrasia as a Character Trait

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For my parents

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‘I have struggled with weakness of the will all my life. So many opportunities passed me by simply because I was unable to keep my eyes on the prize. The lure of the tiniest joy is sufficient to make me avert my eyes from aspirations that I am genuinely committed to. You do not want to hear my diatribe: my love life, my health, my career … all ruined by weakness of the will’

Luc Bovens (1999, 230)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Reintroducing a character approach to akrasia

For several years now, I have been convinced that it is best to limit my shower time to conserve water. Nevertheless, I continue to find it difficult to resist taking long showers. The temptation of the pleasant and relaxing feeling of hot running water often prevails over my judgment that it is best not to use up water unnecessarily, given environmental considerations. One could say that I have a tendency to violate my better judgment in this respect, an 'akratic' tendency, which is persistent and disconcerting to me.

In philosophy, *akrasia*[1] raises two problems. Contemporary philosophers often approach it as *a logical puzzle*. They consider akrasia in the form of a single and isolated episode of acting against one's better judgment.[2] Their challenge is to explain how an akratic action is possible in its most paradoxical form: how can someone perform an action while at the same time judging it best to act otherwise? Ancient and medieval philosophers, on the other hand, view akrasia primarily as *a moral problem*. They regard it as a character trait that stands in the way of a moral ideal, such as virtue

1 This Greek term is often translated in English as 'weakness of will' or sometimes as 'incontinence', following the Latin *incontinentia*. I choose to use the Greek term to avoid presupposing an account of the will and to avoid unwanted bodily connotations. Throughout the dissertation, I transliterate the Greek.

2 This is not to say that these authors necessarily believe that akrasia is uncommon. However, even the contemporary authors who hold that akratic action is not just an exception are puzzled by the question of how a single akratic action is possible.

or leading a life without sin. This dissertation is deliberately not meant as a contribution to solving the logical puzzle; rather, it aims to reintroduce a 'character approach' to akrasia into the philosophical debate.

The contemporary literature on akrasia preoccupies itself almost exclusively with the possibility of single and isolated akratic action. Though this is an interesting philosophical problem, it fails to address a very significant issue: people can, and typically do, act against their better judgment *repeatedly*. Akrasia especially poses a problem in everyday life when it is recurrent, as in the shower example. Amélie Rorty also states that 'Akrasia is typically not episodic. Of course it can in principle occur as a single momentary event, a kind of motivational or epistemic sneeze, a single absent-minded light-fingered questionable bond sale or an isolated flare of rage. But it rarely does' (1997, 649).[3] Despite judging it best to do otherwise, many people fail to stick to a healthy diet, often give in to the temptation for another drink, fail to exercise regularly, do not manage to quit smoking for long, continue to miss deadlines, and so on. These examples immediately show that akrasia as a character trait can take different shapes. However, it seems that many of us persistently fall short in exercising self-control in some sphere of our lives, or know someone else who does.

The aspect of repetition is not a theme in common discussions on akrasia, but it is worthy of analysis of its own. First of all, an episodic view – that is, a view that focuses on akrasia as a single and isolated event – can cloud the true state of a person's level of self-control. For example, someone who is typically akratic when it comes to bodily exercise may manage to go to the gym for a period of time. At that moment, the person seems to be in control, whereas on the whole he[4] is not. Returning to the shower example above, I experienced that I find it easier to refrain from taking long

3 Rorty does not further develop a characterological conception of akrasia, however. Instead, she discusses the social and political sources of akrasia. I return to this in Chapter Six.

4 In this dissertation, I generally use 'he' and 'him' to refer to people in general. I do this with some reluctance, but alternating between 'he' and 'she' in my eyes risks suggesting that there is a significant difference between men and women in this context. Moreover, switching between the two would not do justice to people who picture themselves somewhere else along the gender spectrum.

showers on the whole if I indulge myself now and then, for example after a particularly hard day of work. Seen in isolation, these lapses look akratic, but – assuming that it is not just a matter of rationalization – they may actually enable me to exercise greater self-control in the long run. Secondly, akrasia can have particularly devastating consequences when it is recurrent. Just think of examples about smoking and drinking alcohol. Thirdly, akrasia especially raises criticism when it forms a pattern. It is not a problem when, for example, someone who thinks it best to stick to a healthy diet indulges himself on rare occasions. However, we do not think highly of ourselves (or of others, for that matter) when we continually show little control in relation to what we judge it best to pursue.

What is more, in a recurring form, akrasia raises different and important questions. It is not uncommon to attribute moral significance to character traits, for example. Hence, if recurring akrasia is regarded as a character trait, it is of philosophical interest mainly as a moral problem and not just as an action theoretical one (cf. Thomas Hill 1986 and Jörn Müller 2009).[5] In ancient and medieval literature, in any case, akrasia is considered a kind of vice or character defect which seriously threatens moral ideals. It hinders moral development and our capacity to reach goals is at stake, notably moral goals. This raises several questions, some of which are conceptual. How can akrasia be a stable condition, given that by definition it is characterized by internal conflict? How can we understand the failure of an akratic person, that is, an akratēs, to improve despite the fact that by his own standards he should exercise more self-control? The fact that an akratēs may be aware of his own akratic character adds something to akrasia on a reflective level: how does someone relate to himself when he knows that he has a tendency to violate his better judgment? Other questions are more distinctively moral. For what reasons should we try to avoid or overcome the character trait of akrasia? What factors play a role when we blame someone for being disposed to violate his better judgment? Should we hold people morally

5 Hill and Müller both draw attention to akrasia as a character trait, and I am inspired by their work. Hill's article on the topic remains introductory, however. Müller's work is much more extensive, but, in contrast to my project, it primarily focuses on action theory and on historical studies on akrasia.

responsible for their akratic character? And, as Hill asks himself (but does not answer), 'how can we regard weakness of will as a moral vice if so many of its manifestations are not themselves morally wrong?' (1986, 93). The moral problem of akrasia as a character trait was central to the ancient and medieval philosophical literature on the topic. This approach is strikingly absent in the contemporary literature. As long as people are actually troubled by their akratic character, however, the issue will continue to be of interest.

In this dissertation, I therefore set out to recover this older focus on akrasia as a character trait. What can a fruitful character account of akrasia look like? What are the advantages and the challenges of such an account? In developing a character account of akrasia, I specifically rely on Aristotle.[6] His view on akrasia has been widely discussed in the contemporary literature, but mainly in the context of the logical puzzle of how a single and isolated akratic action is possible. As it turns out, he has much to say specifically about akrasia as a character trait, and this has not received much attention in the contemporary literature. Building on the work of Aristotle, I contend that a character account provides a fruitful and interesting way to approach akrasia.

1.2 The main features of akratic action and important aspects of a character account

In his well-known definition of akratic action, Donald Davidson highlights the most distinctive features: 'In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (*a*) the agent does *x* intentionally; (*b*) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (*c*) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*' (1969, 94). Most authors who are concerned with the topic of akrasia, including myself, concur with

6 In her book *Addiction and Weakness of* Will (2013), Lubomira Radoilska also seems at times to imply an Aristotelian-inspired character concept of akrasia of some description. However, it is difficult to say whether this is indeed the case. If it is, the characterological account remains implicit, and she does not specify further details. Radoilska is mainly interested in moral responsibility, and she uses the distinction between akrasia and addiction to this purpose.

Davidson that akratic action involves 1) a conflict between what a person judges it is best to do and the action he actually performs, 2) intentional behavior, and 3) a basis for the attribution of moral responsibility. I briefly take a closer look at these features and then discuss the important ways in which the character account I have in mind differs from the common contemporary account of akratic action.

The most essential of the above-mentioned features of akratic action is the *conflict between a person's better judgment and his actual behavior*.[7] The term 'better judgment' is an abbreviation of some sort. It denotes a person's own judgment about what it is best to do in a certain situation, all things considered. The better judgment might not be based on a consideration of all possible relevant reasons, however, but might instead be based on the reasons a person has access to or takes into account at the time. Also, it may be explicit or remain implicit. In any case, what matters is that a person judges it best to perform a certain action and yet, due to a competing motivation, ends up acting in a different and incompatible way. As a result of this failure to abide by his better judgment, he disapproves of his own behavior. And, although it is usually not included in definitions of akrasia, this is often said to be accompanied by a negative feeling such as regret or shame.[8] With 'akrasia', I thus refer to a failure to abide by one's judgment about what it is best to do.

Note that I thereby do not adopt Richard Holton's notion of 'weakness of will' in terms of intention-violation (2009). Roughly, Holton understands 'akrasia' as judgment-violation and 'weakness of will' as intention-violation, where the latter need not involve a better judgment. Usually, though, and I follow the contemporary literature in this, the terms 'akrasia' and 'weakness of will' are used interchangeably and to indicate a

7 I am interested in akratic behavior, but the concept of akrasia has also been extended in the literature to beliefs (see, for example, Amélie Rorty 1983 and Alfred Mele 1987, Chapter Eight) and to feelings (Mele 1989).

8 Mathieu Doucet argues that regret is not a reliable indicator of akrasia. I am hesitant to accept his argument, for one thing because he seems to equate disapproving of one's own behavior with the feeling of regret. However, I do agree with his remark that 'weak-willed actions that we perform repeatedly might be more likely to lead to accurate self-assessment than one-off failures' (2016, 459).

type of judgment-violation. This is not to say that akrasia cannot involve intention-violation. As Amélie Rorty explains (1980b), the 'akratic break' can take place at different stages, for example in between better judgment and intention or in between intention and action. Let me emphasize, however, that I am only interested in a gap between intention and action insofar as the intention represents a person's better judgment.

Furthermore, the characteristic conflict that is ascribed to akratic action in the contemporary literature differs in a notable way from how ancient philosophers usually describe akratic conflict. In the older literature, philosophers are primarily interested in cases in which someone fails to abide by objectively true knowledge or reason's correct prescription, rather than by a subjective better judgment. A subjective criterion is still considered crucial for akrasia. Aristotle, in any case, remarks that it makes no difference for discussions of akrasia whether a person possesses knowledge or a firm conviction (*Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) VII.3.1146b24-b31; see also 9.1151a29-1151b5). In the contemporary literature, the subjective aspect of akrasia is more paramount, however. What is central is that a person fails to abide by a better judgment that he himself sincerely endorses. I follow the contemporary literature in this.

In addition to involving conflict between better judgment and behavior, akratic action is *intentional*. I do not want to get into the difficult task of defining precisely what 'intentional' means in this context. I use the term mainly to point out that the way in which an akratēs typically acts is not just a coincidence or merely a mindless automaticity.

Thirdly, akratic action involves *a basis for the attribution* of *moral responsibility*. This feature sets akratic action apart from a condition like compulsion. There is no physical or psychological obstacle that prevents someone who acts akratically from abiding by his better judgment. In the contemporary literature, this moral responsibility element is often captured by defining akratic action as 'free', and in Davidson's definition it is implied by the phrase 'the agent believes there is an alternative action γ open to him'. In the case of akrasia as a character trait, there might be a different kind of basis for the attribution of moral responsibility. Regardless of the precise element that grounds moral responsibility, however, it is essential to

akrasia that it is something in relation to which a person can be held morally responsible.

These three key characteristics are widely agreed upon. However, there are a cluster of important differences between how 'akrasia' is used on a character account and how contemporary philosophers commonly use it. In contemporary discussions, what is central is 'strict' akratic action: acting against one's better judgment while simultaneously judging that it is best to do otherwise. On a character account, akrasia is considered not as a single and isolated episode but rather as a tendency or inclination to violate one's better judgment. This description of akrasia is broader than the common contemporary account of strict akratic action and can in principle encompass it. Strict akratic action can be seen as one way in which the character trait of akrasia might manifest itself. However, as I argue in Chapter Three, a character account can include another type of manifestations as well: violating one's better judgment while temporarily *not* having one's better judgment in mind. This means that on my character account I let go of the demand for strictness in identifying akrasia. The character account of akrasia I have in mind thus differs from the contemporary account of strict akratic action in that 1) it refers not to a single and isolated episode but to a tendency of judgment-violation, and 2) I not only allow for strict manifestations but include all sorts of failures to abide by one's better judgment.

By 'character trait' I refer to a stable and intelligent (or reasons-responsive) state characterized by distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking and acting that are morally relevant, such as a person's core commitments, aspirations and ideals.[9] Based on this definition, I want to point out two further aspects of the character account of akrasia that I have in mind.

First, I am interested in akrasia as a stable condition with positive ontological features of its own that can influence how a person typically thinks, feels and acts. I refrain from further discussion of the metaphysical status of character traits, but I do want to mention that a pattern of akratic

9 This definition is inspired by John Doris' definition of a perfect character trait (that is, of virtue; 2002, 17) and Kristján Kristjánsson's definitions of a character trait and of the moral self (2010, 27 and 232). According to Doris, character traits defined in this way do not exist. I do not agree with him on this, as I explain in Chapter Three.

action can alternatively be defined in a negative way, for example as a complete lack of the capacities or qualities required to exercise control in certain situations. Some sort of lack of quality or capacity may surely (sometimes) play a role in recurring akratic action.[10] Nevertheless, a pattern of akratic action can be sufficiently consistent to allow us plausibly to assume that it can have a positive ontological core. The akratēs' better judgment and contrary inclination to act in a certain way do not form loose strands, but are strongly connected through their conflicting relation. When the akratēs fails to follow his better judgment, he disapproves of this behavior and of the fact that a judgment-contrary motivation leads to action. If, however, he were to be motivated to act in line with his better judgment and to succeed, he would presumably no longer disapprove but rather *approve* of his behavior. Hence, though the akratēs' thoughts, feelings, motivations, and actions are typically not aligned, these elements show consistency in the attitude he has towards them.

Secondly, my focus on akrasia as a character trait adds a moral dimension to akrasia that is usually deliberately absent in contemporary definitions of strict akratic action. A character trait captures both overt behavior and someone's inner condition. On my definition, it also has a built-in moral dimension. As noted above, it is not uncommon to attribute moral significance to character traits. Joel Kupperman, for example, observes that 'the word *character* has moral overtones the word *personality* lacks' (1991, 5) and Kristján Kristjánsson states that character traits have to do with 'a person's moral worth' (2010, 27). This moral aspect distinguishes character traits from personality traits.[11] Character traits include traits such as virtues and vices – prudence, justice, cowardice, self-indulgence, and so on – as well as self-control and akrasia. Personality traits such as extraversion, creativity, and spontaneity are excluded. The former are relevant to the moral evaluation of

10 Müller, for example, discusses how akrasia may be due to a lastingly defective working memory which makes it hard for people to keep their attention on their goals (see Wilhelm Hofmann et al. 2011 and Müller 2016).

11 Kristjánsson points out that character traits can also be distinguished from personality traits because they are 'potentially reason-responsive' (2010, 27). I return to this in Chapter Seven.

a person, the latter are morally neutral. When we apply akrasia to a person it has moral import. To say that someone is akratic is not only to describe him as typically violating his better judgment but also to say something evaluatively negative about the kind of person he is and about the way in which he is inclined to feel and act.

Let me stress, however, that my character account of akrasia is not based on any specific ethical approach. I admit that my account has a virtue ethical flavor to it. This is hard to avoid, given the central role of character in virtue ethics. Moreover, I build on Aristotle, who is presumably the most influential virtue ethicist ever, and I engage with the work of several neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists. These make for interesting conversational partners, not only because of their intriguing ideas on character and character development but also because little has been written on character in the contemporary literature on akrasia. Furthermore, an ethical theory can only appropriately deal with the character account I develop if it can shed light on the evaluative side of akrasia as a character trait. Perhaps virtue ethics, as an agent-based ethics, is best equipped for this job. Nevertheless, my arguments in favor of a character approach to akrasia do not depend on or imply a virtue ethical viewpoint. Hence, the character account I present is of interest to anyone who is concerned with akrasia, regardless of their ethical orientation.

1.3 Sphere and degree of akrasia as a character trait

Throughout the dissertation, I mostly talk about akrasia as a character trait in a general way. However, the character trait may actually differ from person to person. Just like most character traits, akrasia can come in degrees and can pertain to different spheres (or domains). Unlike virtue, though, it is inconceivable that akrasia to the fullest degree can cover all spheres of a person's life.

Consider what akrasia would look like if it were to display the same kind of unity that virtue is often supposed to have.[12] In the most extreme form, someone would be prone to violating any of his better judgments, regardless of what the judgment is about. Firstly, a person with this trait would get nothing done that he set out to do. It is hard to imagine someone who does not manage to realize any of his goals ever, even when the goal is only as small and short-lived as making a meal or putting on clothes.[13] Amélie Rorty also stresses that 'unless he [someone characterized by akrasia] conforms to his preferred judgment in some crucial areas, he'd hardly survive' (1980a, 205).[14]

Secondly, if someone's tendency to violate his better judgment were all-encompassing, the question is whether he would be rational enough to even be considered a person. In 'Incoherence and Irrationality' (1985a), Donald Davidson argues that irrationality – and this includes akrasia – is only possible against the background of rationality. If someone lacks sufficient consistency in thought and action, there is no criterion to identify deviating behavior.[15] Davidson's standard of what counts as 'sufficient consistency' for rationality is quite high. He says: 'An agent cannot fail to comport most of the time with the basic norms of rationality, and it is this fact that makes irrationality possible' (1985a, 352).[16]

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12 Among virtue ethicists, the so-called 'unity of virtue' or 'the reciprocity of the virtues' thesis is quite popular. The idea is, roughly, that a person who has one virtue has all the virtues. Someone cannot be truly moderate without also being practically wise, just, courageous, and so on.

13 Provided, of course, this person sets himself goals that he can be realistically thought to achieve.

14 In the context of this quote, Rorty also says that akrasia is 'often temporary' (1980a, 205). She does not explain what she means by this, but the remark seems strange since she talks of akrasia as something that is characteristic of a person here. Perhaps she has in mind the possibility that people often eventually overcome their akrasia. In Chapter Six, with the help of another article by Rorty, I explain that there is reason to believe that akrasia as a character trait is often highly persistent.

15 Assuming that the better judgment itself is sound.

16 On the basis of this criterion, in 'Incoherence and Irrationality' Davidson also

I think the bar for what counts as sufficient consistency for rationality can be set lower. A person whose thought and action are not consistent *most of the time*[17] can nonetheless act in accordance with his judgment a considerable amount of the time. And, on the occasions that he does not, his inward condition could still render him sufficiently rational. He may clearly grasp the norms of rationality and acknowledge that his thought and action *ought* to be consistent. This is precisely the case with akrasia: a person recognizes that he violates his better judgment and disapproves of this. A person's attitude towards his own behavior can be consistent, even though his thought and action are often not.[18] However, I grant Davidson that if someone's thoughts and actions are rarely consistent, it is highly unlikely that this person is capable of acting on reasons at all. Based on conceptual considerations, then, akrasia cannot plausibly be construed as an entirely broad character trait.

An akratic condition can nevertheless be sufficiently broad or regular to serve as a basis for the moral evaluation of a person. Someone who possesses akrasia as a character trait would be no different than someone who is not fully virtuous or vicious but who possesses only some specific virtues or vices, or only to a certain degree.[19] However, whereas specific virtues and

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seems to rule out habitual akrasia (1985a, 352). The Davidsonian philosopher Xavier Vanmechelen in any case draws the conclusion that akrasia cannot be a character trait and must instead be an action that is atypical of a person (2000, 131). I do not believe that this conclusion follows. For one thing, a person with the character trait of akrasia may still abide by his better judgment most of the time. He may, for example, not always experience (much) judgment-contrary motivation, or he may compensate for his akrasia in one sphere with self-control in another.

17 Note that a virtuous person may not display virtuous behavior most of the time either, if only because he needs to sleep regularly. What is key, however, is that, theoretically, a virtuous person might display virtue in any situation in which virtue can possibly be displayed, whereas for conceptual reasons it is doubtful that a person with an akratic character can act akratically in all possible situations in which there is something over which he could in principle lack control.

18 In Chapter Seven, I address in more detail the question whether a person with akrasia as a character trait can be sufficiently rational to be held morally responsible.

19 This certainly seems possible when it comes to vice. As to virtue, a person could

vices often have names of their own – such as moderation or cowardice – there is hardly any specified terminology to indicate that akrasia pertains to a particular sphere. To make clear the extent to which the moral evaluation of a specific person with akrasia stretches, it can therefore be helpful to add a qualification of the following sort (inspired by one of the ways in which Aristotle talks about akrasia): a person may be akratic with regard to helpfulness or with regard to bodily appetite.

There is no conceptual ground to assign any specific sphere or degree to akrasia, though.[20] As far as the sphere is concerned, there are the usual suspects, such as food, alcoholic drinks and marital (dis)loyalty. And, there might be reasons to be especially interested in a certain sphere, such as its bearing on moral evaluation, how central it is to a person's life, or the expected negative consequences. Furthermore, it would not be surprising if a shortage of self-control in one sphere were to flow into another sphere, especially where the kinds of temptations or aversions at stake are similar. However, it is an empirical matter which sphere(s) akrasia most commonly relates to in real life, and whether there are certain spheres that usually go together.[21] What is clear is that, unlike virtue, akrasia cannot pertain to the fullest degree to all spheres of a person's life. With this established, I now move on to explore the dimensions of akrasia as a character trait.

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be said to only possess certain specific virtues if he is not yet fully virtuous but is already more advanced in certain respects than in others. Another option would be to let go of the thesis of the unity of virtue altogether.

20 Aristotle limits akrasia as such to the sphere of food, drink and sex. However, as I argue in Chapter Five, this restriction does not reflect an empirical claim. Aristotle applies it for reasons of moral evaluation. He acknowledges that people can lack control with regard to other spheres as well.

21 The psychologists Angela Lee Duckworth and Eli Tsukayama, for example, refer to empirical evidence of self-control and its contrary regarding a wide range of spheres. They mention work, interpersonal relationships, drugs, food, exercise, and finances (2015, 399). They also note that 'impulsive behavior [that is, a lack of self-control] in the food domain correlates strongly with impulsive behavior in the alcohol domain' (2015, 394).

1.4 Outline

In *Chapter Two*, I address the main positions in the contemporary discussion on akrasia as a logical puzzle. There are basically three types of solutions to the question of how strict akratic action is possible. I discuss each of these in turn, focusing on the well-known accounts of strict akratic action by Richard Hare, Donald Davidson and Alfred Mele. I show that each type of solution to the logical puzzle has a disadvantage that appears impossible to overcome.

In *Chapter Three*, I present several advantages of regarding akrasia as a character trait rather than a single and isolated type of action. I argue that a character approach can do justice to akrasia as it is of most concern in everyday life because it focuses on akrasia in a recurrent form and can also take all of the factors that are relevant to its moral evaluation into account. In addition, I show that because it is necessarily stretched out over time, the notion of akrasia as a character trait can include not only strict but also non-strict manifestations. This fact also enables a character approach to pay attention to issues other than the logical puzzle. On a character approach, it is possible to remain agnostic about the possibility of strict akratic action because akrasia as a character trait can manifest in non-strict ways as well. Furthermore, I show that the so-called situationism challenge to global character traits does not render the existence of akrasia as a character trait suspicious. This paves the way for a discussion of the repetitive nature of akrasia as a character trait and of its moral status.

To explore the details of what a fruitful character approach to akrasia may look like, I turn to Aristotle's rich account of akrasia as a character trait. According to him, a character trait is 1) stable and long-lasting and 2) a moral notion. In *Chapter Four*, I discuss Aristotle's view on akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait. I argue that although akrasia is stable and long-lasting on his view, the disharmony between reason and affect that is so characteristic of akrasia is only present with the manifestations of the character trait, which occur only temporarily and occasionally. Furthermore, I argue that in his famous passage on akratic action in Book VII.3 of the

Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle is addressing not what he considers akrasia as such but rather the form that the symptom(s) of this character trait can take.

In *Chapter Five*, I address Aristotle's ideas on akrasia as a moral notion. In the largest part of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he compares akrasia to other character traits, such as virtue and vice, but also *enkrateia* (self-control), softness, and beastliness. A closer look at this discussion brings to light where he situates akrasia in a moral hierarchy of character traits. Moreover, it reveals the features he deems relevant for morally evaluating the akratēs, for example the kind of objects an akratēs is likely to be tempted by.

In the final two chapters, I follow the division between the stability of akrasia as a character trait and its moral dimension, and I explore further challenges. In *Chapter Six*, I address how we can understand, on conceptual grounds, how akrasia can remain a stable state. How is it possible for akrasia *not* to develop into self-control or, alternatively, degrade into vice? I engage with the work of contemporary character educationists who present akrasia as a stage of character development. Their work suggests that there is reason to believe that akrasia is likely to change. With the help of Aristotle's account of akrasia as a character trait and Amélie Rorty's views on the social and political sources of akrasia, I discuss how we might understand a person's failure to change his akratic character.

Finally, in *Chapter Seven*, I consider the basis on which akrasia can be thought of as a moral notion. The main worry is that repetitive akratic behavior turns out to be (just) a mindless habit. This would imply a) that we cannot ascribe moral responsibility to the akratēs, and b) that it is doubtful whether akrasia can qualify as a character trait given that it is common to define a character trait as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition. I do not develop a full theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, but I discuss the aspects of the akratēs' condition that are likely to play a role in considerations about moral responsibility. I argue that John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's account of moral responsibility provides promising leads for understanding akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition in relation to which a person can be held morally responsible.

2. CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON AKRATIC ACTION AS A LOGICAL PUZZLE

2.1 The focus of contemporary discussions on akrasia

In the contemporary philosophical literature, akrasia is mostly discussed within the context of action theory. These discussions revolve around one central question: how is it possible for a person to freely and intentionally act against his better judgment?[1] This question arises because ostensibly plausible theories concerning action have a hard time accounting for the possibility of akratic action. This includes theories that primarily try to grasp the nature of human action, but also theories that are otherwise concerned with action, such as theories of action explanation (what explains an action?), intentionality (what makes an action intentional?), free will (when is an action performed freely?), moral responsibility (on what terms is a person responsible for his actions?), and moral language (how does language concerned with action function?).[2] As a result of this action theoretical context, the object of contemporary discussions is akratic *action*. Authors zoom in on what happens during a single and isolated episode in which a person acts against his better judgment.[3]

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1 Note that this question is distinct from the more empirical question of what actually *causes* akratic action.

2 See Richard Hofmann (2015) for a discussion of the different fields in which akratic action poses a philosophical problem from the perspective of action theory.

3 A good illustration of the ongoing contemporary preoccupation with akratic

More precisely, contemporary authors primarily ask about the possibility of akratic action in its 'strictest' form: acting in one way while *simultaneously* judging it best to act otherwise. In the remainder of this chapter, when I talk of 'akratic action' I mean this strict form (unless otherwise indicated). By asking about the strict form, contemporary authors carry the philosophical problem of akratic action to the extreme and pose the problem in the most puzzling way possible. Strict akratic action constitutes a logical puzzle because it seems plausible that there is a tight connection between better judgment and action, but this connection is inconsistent with the experience of strict akratic action in which a person acts in one way while at the very same time judging it best to act differently.

In this chapter, I first present the logical puzzle of akratic action (2.2).[4] I turn to Donald Davidson's classic diagnosis of the problem of akratic action to introduce the puzzle. Even though not everyone phrases it in the same way he does, Davidson's formulation of the logical puzzle offers a fruitful way to compare the different kinds of solutions that have been offered in answer to the question of how akratic action is possible. Secondly, I discuss the main positions in the contemporary literature on the logical puzzle. Basically, there are three types of strategies for solving it. I discuss each of these with the help of what are probably the most well-known and influential representatives of these strategies in contemporary literature: the accounts of akratic action by Richard Hare (2.2.1), Donald Davidson (2.2.2), and Alfred Mele (2.2.3). I also show that each of the three strategies faces a problem that is inherent to the strategy itself and that therefore appears impossible to overcome.

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action is Sarah Stroud's entry on weakness of will in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014).

4 For a more extensive discussion of the logical puzzle, see Xavier Vanmechelen (2000).

2.2 The logical puzzle

The possibility of akratic action is puzzling because it seems irreconcilable with the intuition that there is a tight connection between evaluation and motivation. On the one hand, it seems probable that actions are explained in terms of what a person sees as the strongest reason for action. On the other hand, the alleged occurrence of akratic action seems to show that this cannot always be the case.

In 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?', Davidson describes the logical puzzle of akratic (or incontinent) action in terms of three inconsistent principles (the first two of which exclude the third), each of which seems intuitively plausible on its own.[5] As Davidson remarks: 'the problem posed by the apparent contradiction is acute enough to be called a paradox' (1969, 95).[6] He describes the principles as follows (1969, 95)[7]:

> P1. If an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y, then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally.
>
> P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do x than to do y, then he wants to do x more than he wants to do y.
>
> P3. There are incontinent actions.

Recall that Davidson defines akratic action as follows: 'In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (*a*) the agent does *x* intentionally; (*b*) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (*c*) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*' (1969, 94).

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5 I discuss Davidson's own suggestion for a solution to the logical puzzle further on.

6 Geoffrey Mortimore (1971) also talks about a paradox in this context.

7 Davidson does not insist that the principles have to be formulated in this precise way. He maintains, however, 'that no amount of tinkering with P1-P3 will eliminate the underlying problem' (1969, 96).

The first of Davidson's principles links motivation to action. It states that of the options that a person considers open to him, he will carry out the one that he is most strongly motivated (wants the most) to perform. Motivation is often understood in a broad sense and is consequently often identified as that which determines action. A statement like P1 can therefore be considered a tautology. Nevertheless, authors have pointed out that the idea expressed in P1 is not necessarily redundant. Xavier Vanmechelen, for example, believes it may refer to a person's experience of the intensity of his aspirations in relation to his better judgments (2000, 147). Mele, on the other hand, stresses that the strongest motivation need not always be the most affectionately intense (1987, 162, n.11). He holds that the added value of P1 is that it provides a point of departure for seeking an explanation of a person's akratic action (1987, 14-15). In any case, because a principle like P1 can essentially be considered a tautology, it is hardly ever questioned in the literature.[8]

The second of Davidson's principles links evaluation to motivation. It captures the intuition that what a person judges to be the best option for action corresponds with what he is most strongly motivated to do. P1 and P2 together thus entail that a person's better judgment, via motivation, leads to action. The idea that underlies P2 is that the higher a person values performing a certain action, the stronger he is motivated to do it, and conversely for negative evaluation and motivation. This assumption is often called motivational *internalism*: judgments about action correspond directly with motivation, without the interference of any other factor. Motivational *externalism*, on the other hand, consists of the idea that judgments about action do not come with motivation. Note that on such a motivational externalistic view, akratic action is of no special interest, because it is taken for granted that better judgment and motivation come apart. The possibility of akratic action only challenges theories that assume some form of motivational internalism.[9]

8 Randolph Clarke (1994) is an exception. He appeals to non-mental neurological conditions to question P1.

9 See, for example, G.F. Schueller (2010) for an overview of different forms of motivational internalism.

The third of Davidson's principles simply states that akratic actions occur. When Davidson formulated this principle, it was not yet common to add a term such as 'strict' to the description of akratic action. However, it is clear that strict akratic action is what he has in mind. In the article in which Davidson formulates the puzzle, he gives an example of akratic action and describes someone who is explicitly deliberating and thereby seems to be very much aware of what is going on at the moment of action (1969, 101-102). Also, in a later article he says that 'the defining cases of akrasia' are those in which someone 'acts intentionally while aware that everything considered a better course of action is open to him' (1982, 295). Moreover, only *strict* akratic action undeniably raises the logical puzzle, for by definition it entails that there is a direct clash between what a person judges it would be best to do and what he actually does. To come back to P3: this principle expresses the occurrence of akratic actions – by which is meant strict akratic actions – and it is therefore inconsistent with the first two principles. P3 shows that evaluation does *not* always result in action (P1 and P2 combined) and thus that a person's better judgment does *not* necessarily determine what he is most strongly motivated to do (P2).

In sum, the logical puzzle is constituted by the fact that intuitively there seems to be a strong link between evaluation and action (via motivation), yet the experience of akratic action – in which better judgment and action clearly come apart – seems real enough as well.

There are roughly three possible strategies for solving the logical puzzle: 1) deny the actual occurrence of akratic action by claiming that this type of action is altogether impossible (drop P3), 2) redescribe the principles in such a way that they are no longer inconsistent (maintain P1-P3 in an alternative form), and 3) deny that there is a tight connection between evaluation and motivation (drop or alter P2). Note, again, that a strategy that consists of dropping P1 is not really an option because this principle is mostly considered a tautology. Below, I describe each of the three above-mentioned strategies in turn and illustrate how they can be applied by presenting representative accounts that are classics in the contemporary literature on akratic action.

2.2.1 First strategy: denying the possibility of akratic action

A first strategy for trying to tackle the logical puzzle is to outright deny that it is possible for akratic action to occur. Or, in Davidson's terminology, to drop P3. Akrasia skeptics – as we may call authors who apply this strategy – maintain that the experience of akratic action is misleading. They typically provide an alternative description of what happens when someone appears to act against his better judgment. The difficulty for this strategy is, however, to argue convincingly that the offered alternative description applies to *all* experiences of akratic action.

Roughly, there are two ways to deny the possibility of akratic action.[10] The first option is to argue that a person who fails to abide by his better judgment cannot truly and sincerely endorse this judgment, at least not at the moment of action. This undermines criterion (*c*) of Davidson's definition of akratic action. A person may, for example, merely pay lip service to the better judgment, perhaps because it is a social convention. Or, he may at the moment of action temporarily change his better judgment or set it aside. The second option is to reject the idea that a person can *freely* act against his better judgment. This thwarts criterion (*b*) of Davidson's definition. Acting against one's better judgment then comes down to a form of addiction or compulsion. Hence, akrasia skeptics can deny the possibility of akratic action in two ways: by claiming that at the moment of action the better judgment that a person violates cannot be sincere or by claiming that acting against one's better judgment cannot be free.

Richard Hare appeals to both options in denying the possibility of akratic action. I discuss his account in some detail as an illustration of the 'skeptical' strategy of dealing with the logical puzzle.[11] He gives up on

10 Theoretically, there is a third option. One could dispute whether akratic action can be *intentional*. In this case, criterion (*a*) of Davidson's definition of akratic action would not be met. Nobody in the literature defends this option, however.

11 Gary Watson's skepticism about akratic action is another well-known and influential representative of this strategy (1977). His argument hinges on the idea of irresistible desires. For others who apply the skeptical strategy, see the references in my discussion in Chapter

the possibility of akratic action because it is incompatible with a theory concerning action of which he is very much convinced, that is, his theory of prescriptivism.

Hare develops his theory of prescriptivism in *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963).[12] He sets out to investigate the way in which moral language functions. In particular, he asks about the meaning and function of value-words that appear in moral judgments, such as 'good', 'right' and 'ought'. Hare's central claim is that moral judgments are prescriptive and universalizable. By 'universalizable' Hare simply means that a moral judgment applies in situations that are either exactly or relevantly similar (1963, 33). For example, all other things being equal, if I think Jane should go to prison because she owes me a large amount of money, it would be inconsistent of me not to subscribe to the judgment that I should go to prison for owing Oscar a large amount of money. It is due to the other aspect – that of prescriptivism – that the alleged occurrence of akratic action poses a challenge to Hare's theory of moral language.

According to Hare, moral judgments are prescriptive because the primary meaning of value-words in moral judgments is prescriptive. He does not deny that value-words also have a descriptive aspect to their meaning. A tennis racket or a person is called good because of certain factual features. Furthermore, value-words can be used in a descriptive way, for example, in quoting other people's judgments or referring to conventional standards. Hare emphasizes, however, that the primary meaning of value-words is prescriptive. Consider the following example: 'If we came to disapprove of industry, we should not stop calling the industrious man industrious; but, if we had previously called him a good man because, among other virtues, he was industrious, we should, if we came to disapprove of his industry very much, stop calling him good' (1963, 24-25). If the facts remain the same, but

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Three of non-strict forms of akratic action (descriptions of akratic action in terms of temporary judgment shifts, self-deception and rationalization).

12 Hare further expands his theory of prescriptivism and his thoughts on akratic action in his later work, *Moral Thinking* (1981). However, Hare still does not make room for the possibility of freely acting against a better judgment about what it is best to do in a *specific* situation.

normative standards alter, value-words come to apply to different facts. It is the primary function of value-words 'to commend or in some other way to guide choices or actions' (1952, 171); *what* is commended is secondary.

Hare's claim goes further than this, however. He maintains not only that moral judgments are *meant* to guide action but also that they *do* guide action when a person sincerely assents to them: 'It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a […] command addressed to ourselves, and *at the same time* not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so' (1952, 20; cf. 1963, 79). I will come back to the qualification between the brackets, but here I want to point out that, according to Hare, to grasp the meaning of a moral judgment is to understand that it bears on action (1952, 168-169; cf. 1963, 79). This view resembles the idea that is expressed by the combination of the first two of Davidson's principles (only Hare talks of moral judgments rather than judgments in general about what it would be best to do). In other words, Hare endorses a strong form of motivational internalism and holds that there is an immediate link between moral judgment and action (presumably via motivation).

The possibility of akratic action therefore challenges Hare's theory of prescriptivism. As Hare phrases it: 'The problem is posed by the fact that moral judgements, in their central use, have it as their function to guide conduct. If this is their function, how can we think, for example, that we ought not to be doing a certain thing […] and then not be guided by it?' (1963, 70). Hare mainly talks of akratic action in terms of 'backsliding' and 'moral weakness'. Especially the latter term indicates that he has in mind acting against a *moral* judgment only. That is, he only addresses instances of akratic action in which a moral judgment is violated (be it based on weighed preferences, on principles, on ideals or on a conception of human excellence). This fits his aim of clarifying moral language. It is *moral* weakness that challenges the view that moral language is prescriptive. Nonetheless, what Hare says on moral weakness could also easily apply to prudential cases of akratic action, for he holds that the properties of value-words (prescriptiveness and universalizability) are not exclusive to moral contexts (e.g. 1952, 144).

Hare addresses the problem of akratic action in Chapter Five of *Freedom and Reason*. He discusses the issue on a linguistic and on a psychological level, reflecting the two different options for denying the possibility of akratic action described above. First, Hare considers the possibility of akratic action on a linguistic level and concludes that the respective moral judgment in such cases is insincere, that is, it is not used prescriptively. He maintains that value-words such as 'ought' imply 'can' when used in their proper prescriptive sense. However, when value-words are only used to describe, they do not imply 'can'. The prescriptive aspect of the meaning of a value-word can be neglected in order to emphasize its descriptive aspect, for example, when it is used to describe a general view (1963, 75). This is what happens, according to Hare, when we 'backslide'. The moral judgment is downgraded. A person may recite the general slogan that one ought to eat two pieces of fruit a day, without presuming that *he himself* ought to eat two pieces of fruit a day. Either the universalizability is neglected and he does not apply the prescription to his own situation, or the prescriptive element is neglected altogether and the moral judgment is used to describe, for example, a social convention or another person's conviction (1963, 75-77). In either case, the person does not sincerely assent to the moral judgment himself. On Hare's view, what appears to be akratic action is actually a case in which a moral judgment is not used in its primary prescriptive meaning.

Secondly, Hare addresses the issue on a psychological level and states that in apparent cases of akratic action the action is unfree, that is, it involves a psychological inability. This explains why Hare includes the bracketed qualification that I pointed out earlier. He claims that if someone does not do what a moral judgment prescribes, he is not capable of doing it. Hare's argumentation for this claim is very thin, though. He is of the opinion that the terminology of 'weakness' – recall that he mainly talks about akratic action in terms of moral weakness – reveals that we are dealing with an inability (1963, 77). He cites two literary passages: one spoken by Ovid's Medea, who claims that she cannot resist and is compelled when she kills her children to take revenge on her husband Jason, and one depicting the biblical Saint Paul, who says that he is a slave and prisoner of sin. Hare states

that both of these often-discussed examples of akrasia[13] involve an appeal to helplessness (1963, 78-79). Hare does not explain what he takes the inability to consist in, nor does he discuss whether it is the kind of inability that excludes moral responsibility. Moreover, he does not provide an argument for why we should interpret the two examples in terms of inability, or, if we do, why we should assume that these are typical cases of akratic action. It is clear, though, that according to him alleged akratic action is at least usually a psychological inability.[14]

Interestingly, Hare maintains that the downgrading of a moral judgment and the psychological inability to do what this moral judgment prescribes typically go together (1963, 75). For the sake of the argument, he grants that it might perhaps be possible after all to act against a moral judgment that is used in its prescriptive sense, but he emphasizes that the action would then still not be akratic because of a psychological inability to perform the prescribed action. Hare thus holds that if someone does not put a moral judgment into practice, he does not sincerely endorse that moral judgment, or else he was unable to do so, and that in most cases of apparent backsliding both of these possibilities obtain. On Hare's view, then, it is impossible to freely act against one's moral judgment while sincerely assenting to it at the moment of action.[15]

There are several problems with Hare's account of akratic action, though. Some of these are particular to his view. For example, Hare does not explain why a strong form of motivational internalism would hold and, as I already mentioned, his argument that akratic action reflects a psychological inability is very thin.[16]

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13 It appears to me that a passage from Euripides' *Medea* is actually cited more often as an example of akratic action than the passage Hare quotes from Ovid's version.

14 Hare does not take seriously the option that compelled instances of acting against one's better judgment could be the result of a *physical* inability. Given our current understanding of, for example, neuroscience and addiction it nonetheless seems plausible that physical obstacles may sometimes be involved.

15 In other terms, Hare's view entails that akratic action is a form of compulsion and therefore a type of behavior for which people are not commonly held morally responsible.

16 For more extensive discussions and criticism of Hare's position on akratic action,

Other problems pertain more generally to the 'skeptical' strategy for dealing with the logical puzzle. As with any attempt to deny the possibility of akratic action, the problem remains that the experience of akratic action is highly compelling. Why not take this experience more seriously? Hare's alternative description of the experience of akratic action in terms of the downgrading of a moral judgment or a psychological inability may very well sometimes be accurate, as may be alternative descriptions presented by other authors. However, Hare's view and the skeptical strategy more generally do not succeed in solving the logical puzzle, because it is impossible to prove that alternative descriptions of akratic action apply to *all* experiences of akratic action.[17]

However, how can one persuade someone who is not already convinced of the possibility of akratic action to adapt his theory of action so as to accommodate it? This is a difficult matter, but one option would be to show that the possibility of akratic action is compatible with a strong form of motivational internalism after all. This is precisely what authors who apply the second strategy of dealing with the logical puzzle aim to do.

2.2.2 Second strategy: distinguishing between different kinds of judgments

A second strategy for dealing with the logical puzzle is to argue that the possibility of akratic action can be combined with a strong form of motivational internalism. In Davidson's terminology, this means showing

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see, for example, Charles Taylor (1980), William Frankena (1988), and Thomas Spitzley (1992, 125-164).

17 In Chapter Three, I argue that on a character account of akrasia some of these alternative descriptions can in fact qualify as genuine instances of akratic action. I especially have in mind so-called 'non-strict' descriptions of failing to abide by one's better judgment – that is, instances in which a person does *not* have the relevant better judgment in mind at the moment of action. In contemporary discussions on the logical puzzle, however, authors tend to dismiss such non-strict descriptions as examples of akratic action or see them as derivative at most (see, for example, Davidson 1969, 97-98 and Mele 1987, 19).

that P3 is consistent with P1 and P2. All three principles are maintained, but they are reinterpreted in such a way that they do not contradict one another.

This strategy requires some form of what we may call, following Michael Bratman (1979), a non-homogeneous account of practical reasoning. For if one wishes to maintain both that there is a tight link between a person's judgment and action (P1 and P2) and that it is possible to act contrary to what one judges it would be best to do (P3), then there must be something about the judgment that warrants action that sets it apart from the judgment that is violated in akratic action. Otherwise, it cannot be the case that all three principles are correct. And that is what constituted the logical puzzle in the first place. There might be, for example, different types of judgment involved or different kinds of processes of practical deliberation. As I will show, however, this strategy cannot fend off the question of why akratic action would not also be possible in relation to the judgment that is the subject of a principle like P2.

Davidson applies this strategy himself in answer to the logical puzzle.[18] To illustrate how the second strategy might take shape, I look further into his account of akratic action as presented in his article 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?' (1969).[19] Like Hare, Davidson becomes interested in akratic action because it poses a challenge to his theory of action.

In 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes' (1963), Davidson defends a theory of action that implies a strong form of motivational internalism. He holds that reasons *rationalize* an action (make intelligible why someone performs this particular action) and at the same time *cause* that action (1963, 685). A reason for action, Davidson takes it, consists of a pro-attitude[20] and a belief.

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18 Michael Bratman (1979) also applies a form of the second strategy in his account of akratic action.

19 For extensive discussions of Davidson's work on akratic action, see for example Charles Taylor (1980), Paul Grice and Judith Baker (1985), Thomas Spitzley (1992, 165-223), and Jeanne Peijnenburg (1996, Chapter Six).

20 Pro-attitudes can be desires, but according to Davidson they can also be 'wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, and public and private goals and values in so far as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed toward actions of a certain kind' (1963, 686).

This pro-attitude/belief-pair can be represented in a practical syllogism, that is, a set of premises on the basis of which a conclusion about action can be drawn. According to Davidson, the conclusions of different practical syllogisms provide different reasons for action. He points out that in practical reasoning we weigh multiple reasons, that is, compare the conclusions of several practical syllogisms to establish what it is best to do (1963, 697). Importantly, this means that according to Davidson, the conclusion of just any a practical syllogism does not necessarily explain and determine action. Nevertheless, he holds that an action corresponds with the conclusion of *a* practical syllogism (1963, 697). Davidson does not make it entirely explicit, but the way I understand his 1963 view is that the reason that corresponds with (explains and determines) action is the reason that emerges after weighing all of the relevant available alternatives, which he later calls an 'all things considered judgment'.

In 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?' (1969), Davidson recognizes that his 1963 view is challenged by the possibility of akratic action. It challenges both his claim that reasons rationalize actions and his claim that reasons cause actions. As Jeanne Peijnenburg remarks: 'If reasons and actions are conceptually connected, then *akrasia* constitutes a crack in the conceptual chain. […] If reasons cause actions in conformity with obdurate causal laws, how could a person ever act against his reasons?' (1996, 178). Both in the case that reasons explain actions and in the case that reasons cause actions, one would expect actions to match the *strongest* reasons. With akratic action, this is clearly not the case.

Davidson nevertheless tries to make room for akratic action within his theory of action. He draws a distinction between two different kinds of judgments in order to do so: conditional and unconditional judgments. Basically, the difference is that conditional judgments are based on premises, whereas unconditional judgments are detached from premises.[21]

First, consider conditional judgments (or *prima facie* judgments, or relational judgments). This kind of judgment is the conclusion of a practical

21 Conditional judgments take a form such as '*pf*(*a* is better than *b*, *r*)', where *r* refers to a reason or set of reasons, whereas unconditional judgments look like '*a* is better than *b*' (Davidson 1969, 109-110).

syllogism. Since, according to Davidson, practical syllogisms only represent *a* reason for action, conditional judgments can conflict. For example, in view of the fact that this piece of food is sweet and I like sweet food, I judge that it is better to eat it than not to eat it. In view of the fact that this piece of food is poisonous, however, and insofar as I do not want to be poisoned, I judge that it is better not to eat it. Logically, these two judgments do not conflict, for they rest on different premises. However, they do give conflicting advice about which action to pursue (1969, 104–106). To resolve this issue, a person must form an argument in which the relevant available reasons are weighed and compared (1969, 107). According to Davidson, the new argument that arises is strictly speaking not a practical syllogism itself. He nevertheless maintains that the judgment that is formed is still conditional because it is based on and cannot be detached from the reasons (and the premises that they are based on) that have been taken into consideration. For example, taking the two above-mentioned practical syllogisms together, I judge that it is better not to eat this piece of food than to eat it, for I prefer not being poisoned over eating sweet food. Davidson calls such a judgment, which takes into consideration all the available relevant reasons, an 'all things considered judgment'. An all things considered judgment is conditional because it is a judgment about what it is best to do *given* the reasons that have been taken into account (1969, 107). A conditional judgment, and therefore also an all things considered judgment, cannot be detached from the premises and reasons on which it is based.

Unconditional judgments (or *sans phrase* judgments, or all-out judgments), on the other hand, *are* detached from premises. They simply state that it is better to do one thing rather than another, without referring to any further practical deliberation. An unconditional judgment is neither the conclusion of a practical syllogism nor the conclusion of a subsequent argument based on the comparison between different practical syllogisms. Davidson's notion of an unconditional judgment remains quite vague. On what ground can it be considered a type of judgment? How are unconditional judgments formed? Also, Davidson holds that an unconditional judgment always reflects one or another conditional judgment, for, as far as he is concerned, it is always possible to point out *a* reason for a person's action, even for an akratic action. However, he does not explain precisely how

unconditional judgments relate to conditional judgments. His main point is that since unconditional judgments are not *based* on premises and reasons, they do not necessarily reflect the conditional judgment that is a person's all things considered judgment (although this *is* the default mode, according to Davidson). He concludes that an unconditional judgment therefore does not necessarily match a person's all things considered judgment or *best* reason for action (1969, 110).

The crux of Davidson's account of akratic action is that actions are geared to unconditional judgments and not to conditional judgments. On his view, '[i]ntentional action […] is geared directly to unconditional judgments like 'It would be better to do *a* than to do *b*.' Reasoning that stops at conditional judgments […] is practical only in its subject, not in its issue' (1969, 110). The practical reasoning that leads to a conditional judgment is practical in the sense that it is *about* practical matters. Davidson maintains that this does not go beyond theorizing, however. Unconditional judgments, on the other hand, have concrete actions as their object. He does not clarify the ways in which unconditional judgments are similar to and different from actions. Davidson simply points out that it is unconditional judgments, and not conditional judgments, that motivate a person to act.

In the case of akratic action, a person judges all things considered – that is, conditionally – that it is better to do *a* than to do *b*, but judges unconditionally that it is better to do *b* than to do *a* (1969, 110). His unconditional judgment moves him to do *b*, while his all things considered judgment advises him to do *a*. This is possible because there is no necessary or logical relation between conditional and unconditional judgments.[22] This means that on Davidson's view the three principles that constitute the logical puzzle do not really logically contradict one another.[23] The kind of

22 Akratic action is nonetheless irrational. Davidson maintains that this is because akratic action violates what he dubs the 'principle of continence', which advises every rational being qua being rational to 'perform the action judged best on the basis of all available relevant reasons' (1969, 112). Of course, one could also just consider akratic action irrational because a person does not do as he himself judges what all things considered it would be best to do (Spitzley 1992, 206).

23 Note that here Davidson only addresses the *logical* possibility of akratic action. In his later article, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' (1982), he also discusses how irrational action

judgment that is the subject of P2 is an unconditional judgment, whereas the kind of judgment that is the subject of P3 is a conditional judgment – more specifically, an all things considered judgment.

Davidson's distinction between two different kinds of judgments seems ingenious, but his account of akratic action nevertheless faces important difficulties. For starters, one may wonder whether unconditional judgments could truly be considered judgments, given that they are not based on premises, reasons or anything of the sort. In fact, in his 1978 article 'Intending', Davidson equates unconditional judgments with intentions (1978, 56; cf. 1985b, 197). He does not explain how this bears on his account of akratic action. It seems relevant, though, since the intuition that a principle like P2 tries to capture is about a strong relation between evaluation and motivation, not about intention and motivation. In any case, even if unconditional judgments could truly be considered judgments, Davidson's account of akratic action still faces a further problem.

Davidson allows for acting against a conditional judgment, but why is it not possible to act against an unconditional judgment (or, if you will, an intention)[24] as well?[25] Davidson manages to make room in his theory for a certain kind of strict akratic action: acting in one way while simultaneously *conditionally* judging that it is best to act otherwise. However, his way of approaching the logical puzzle comes at the cost of ruling out another imaginable form of strict akratic action: acting against one's *unconditional* judgment or intention. Davidson's solution therefore

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– which includes akratic action – is *factually* possible. He develops a Freudian divided mind theory to this purpose. For a further discussion of this part of Davidson's work in relation to akratic action, see for example Peijnenburg 1996, 211-217.

24 In Davidson's 1978 article 'Intending', the text is inconclusive about whether he sticks to his view that an unconditional judgment/intention corresponds with action or whether he now believes that a breach between an unconditional judgment/intention and action is possible. The latter option would imply a change to his view on the logical puzzle, for it would mean that he no longer holds that there is a type of judgment that warrants action, and thus that he has abandoned P2.

25 Relatedly, we may wonder whether the intuition that P2 tries to capture is not actually about *conditional* and thus about all things considered judgments (cf. Taylor 1980, 500).

seems to shift the challenge about the possibility of akratic action rather than solving it: he accounts for one form that akratic action might take (acting against a conditional or an all things considered judgment), but he leaves us wondering why another form of akratic action is not also possible (acting against an unconditional judgment or an intention).

This difficulty with Davidson's account applies more generally to the second strategy for solving the logical puzzle. If someone argues that the kind of judgment that warrants action (as in P2) differs from the kind of judgment (or the underlying process of practical reasoning) involved in akratic action (as in P3), then what automatically arises is the question of whether akratic action is not also possible in relation to the first kind of judgment. Another option is to try to make room in one's theory for the possibility of the latter form of akratic action as well, in Davidson's case to allow for acting against an unconditional judgment or intention. However, this would require one to let go of the idea that there is a tight connection between better judgment, motivation, and action. This is what the third and final strategy for dealing with the logical puzzle suggests.

2.2.3 Third strategy: denying a necessary link between better judgment and action

A third strategy in response to the logical puzzle is to give up on a strong form of motivational internalism. On Davidson's sketch of the puzzle, this means dropping P2, for, as noted above, P1 is typically considered a tautology. In other words, it comes down to denying that there is a tight link between better judgment and motivation. The idea is that a better judgment does not necessarily correspond with the strongest motivation and thereby does not automatically lead to action.

The third strategy does not entail adopting a form of motivational externalism, however. As I explained above, akratic action poses no challenge to motivational externalism, because this position does not assume that there is any connection between better judgment and motivation, other than perhaps coincidentally. In the context of motivational externalism there is

no logical puzzle, for it does not involve a principle like Davidson's P2. The possibility of akratic action only poses a challenge to theories that in some way or another assume a form of motivational internalism.

In trying to make room for the possibility of akratic action, the third strategy instead entails *weakening* motivational internalism (cf. Vanmechelen 2002, 681). A weak form of motivational internalism assumes that there is *some* relation between better judgment and motivation. It can still be considered the default mode that a better judgment, via motivation, leads to action. However, better judgment and motivation can occasionally come apart, as in the case of akratic action. Despite judging it best to act in a certain way, a person can sometimes be most strongly motivated to act otherwise. The ultimate problem for this kind of strategy is not making room for the possibility of strict akratic action but explaining why better judgments sometimes do and sometimes do not lead to action.

I discuss Alfred Mele's influential account of akratic action[26] as a representative of the third strategy.[27] Mele has written several books and many articles about akratic action. He has not altered his general view on akratic action, however. I base my discussion mainly on his book *Irrationality* (1987), where Mele discusses akratic action most extensively and systematically. Unlike Hare and Davidson, Mele's reason for discussing akratic action is not that it poses a challenge to his theory of action. Rather, he sets out to develop a theory of action – more specifically, a *causal* theory of action (1987, 11) – that takes the possibility of akratic action seriously from the start (1987, viii).

Mele believes that akratic action simply shows that better judgments do not always result in the strongest motivation, and thus that a principle like Davidson's P2 is false (1987, 49). He stresses that it is crucial to distinguish

26 Mele recognizes that the Greek term 'akrasia' originally indicates a character trait, and he says that akratic action may sometimes be the result of a character trait (see, for example, 1987, 3). However, in line with contemporary literature, he chooses to focus on the conceptual possibility and causal explanation of single and isolated strict akratic actions (1987, 4 and 7).

27 For other prominent accounts of akratic action which make use of the third strategy, see, for example, Robert Audi (1979), Michael Stocker (1979), David Pears (1982), Robert Dunn (1987), and Jeanette Kennett and Michael Smith (1994).

between the evaluative and the motivational force of a better judgment.[28] He holds that practical reasoning does not ensure the strongest motivation to act because motivation is not what practical reasoning is about; it is about evaluating or ranking options for action. Nevertheless, Mele thinks that reasons (which are constituted by beliefs and desires) play an important role in action explanation.[29] He just maintains that they are often not sufficient to explain action (1987, 40-41). Mele thus supports a weak form of motivational internalism. According to him, reasons can motivate a person, but the motivational force of a person's best reason is not always sufficiently strong to result in action.

Mele emphasizes that, in addition to beliefs and desires, a model of action therefore needs further elements that can help to explain how akratic action is possible. He holds that intentions do not suffice for this purpose, for he wishes to allow not only for a form of akratic action in which there is a breach between better judgment and intention but also for the possibility of an executive form of akratic action in which there is a breach between intention and action (1987, 35). That is, he also wants to make room for the form of akratic action that Davidson's account seems to rule out. On Mele's view, neither better judgments nor intentions warrant action. He concludes that a sound model of action should be expanded especially by including an executive element, and he names this executive element 'self-control' (1987, 51).

The concept of self-control thus plays a central role in Mele's account of akratic action.[30] He uses the term 'self-control' in several different ways, most prominently to refer to an ability and to a type of action. He says

28 Mele borrows this distinction from Gary Watson, who in 'Free Agency' (1975) introduces two senses of the term 'wanting': an evaluative and a motivational sense.

29 In later work, Mele makes explicit that according to him it is still the default mode that actions are caused by the best reasons and thus by better judgments (see 1991, 44-45 and 2012, 64).

30 He also addresses paradoxes raised by self-control on its own, such as how a person can exercise self-control in support of a certain action if he is more motivated to perform an alternative. I will not go into this since I am mainly interested how he deals with the logical puzzle, but see *Irrationality*, Chapter Five, or for more recent discussions Mele (1997) and (2014).

that to *act* in a self-controlled way is to stick to one's intention to act in a certain way here and now[31] in the face of competing motivation (1987, 52). He holds that through the ability of self-control we can exercise some amount of influence over motivation. He points out that besides reasons (beliefs and desires) and intentions, several other factors can influence a person's motivation to act, including the proximity of the desired object, a person's motivational base (roughly, the combination of his motivation to perform a certain action and his motivation to perform alternatives; 1987, 69), a person's attentional condition, and whether (and if so, how) a person makes an attempt to act in a self-controlled way. Each of these factors can contribute to what Mele calls a person's motivational balance (1987, 44-45). However, he claims that only through the ability of self-control can a person, in the face of competing motivation (and right up to the very last moment), turn the motivational balance around (1987, 44-45 and 53).

I like to think of Mele's idea of a person's motivational balance in terms of the metaphor of a seesaw. Imagine that each motivational factor adds weight to either the left side of the seesaw (say, the option selected by one's better judgment) or the right side (say, the akratic alternative), and that the seesaw touches the ground (results in action) on the side which is the heaviest at the moment of action (assuming that there is sufficient weight on one or the other side to begin with). Self-control can influence the motivational weight of either side of the seesaw and can bring it about that the seesaw touches the ground at the 'better judgment side' even when, close to the moment of action, it leans towards the side of the akratic alternative.[32]

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31 This intention typically represents a better judgment (1987, 54-55), but Mele allows for 'unorthodox' cases of self-control as well. In such cases, the exercise of self-control is in the service of an intention that does not represent a better judgment. He mentions the example of Freddy, who exercises self-control to keep his fears of breaking into a house in check even though he judges it best not to break in (1987, 54; cf. 1990).

32 Of course, the seesaw metaphor oversimplifies matters. For starters, there might be more than two options competing for the strongest motivation. Secondly, as Mele stresses, many factors do not have a fixed motivational weight (1987, 44). The seesaw metaphor might give the impression that each motivational factor contributes a specific amount of weight to the motivational balance. Self-control might, however, also shift the balance by increasing or diminishing the weight of other motivational factors, or by functioning as a

According to Mele, there are many different ways in which a person can exercise self-control and thereby many ways in which someone can use his ability of self-control to change the motivational balance. Mele distinguishes between two kinds of self-control, which he calls 'brute resistance' and 'skilled resistance'. He defines *brute resistance* as 'resisting temptation by sheer effort of will' (1987, 26). He tries to make this notion less mysterious by describing it in terms of intentions. He holds that brute resistance may consist in a further intention that is aimed at retaining another intention, typically the intention that represents one's better judgment (1987, 26).[33]

Skilled resistance, as the term suggests, instead relies on techniques. The list of techniques is potentially endless. Inspired by both theory and the results of empirical research, Mele mentions examples such as manipulating one's environment (1987, 26; think of someone who throws away his supply of cigarettes at a moment at which he has no desire to smoke; 1987, 63-64), promising yourself a reward, refusing to have second thoughts, and focusing your attention on certain aspects of the available alternatives (1987, 23-24, see also 52-53). With regard to the latter technique, for example, Mele discusses that a person can influence the impact of the proximity of a desired object through controlling his attentional condition. Psychological research on delayed gratification indicates that the motivational weight that stems from the proximity of an akratic alternative can be diminished by focusing one's attention on something other than the 'arousing' aspects of the desired object, such as its 'informational' aspects (1987, 88-90). A person is likely to be less motivated to eat a marshmallow if he focuses his attention on something other than how nice it would taste. Hence, according to Mele, there are several self-control techniques that a person can use to try to influence his motivational balance in view of his better judgment.

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center of rotation that influences how much weight is required to shift the balance.

33 Mele does not explain what such an intention would look like. I picture a person who says to himself things such as 'let's do this' and 'stick to the plan'. Perhaps the intention could also take the form of what Holton calls 'contrary inclination defeating intentions', or 'resolutions' (2009, 77). These are intentions that are designed to prevent one from giving in to temptation, such as an intention not to reconsider one's judgment.

Mele does not claim, however, that people always exercises self-control when they can, or that every attempt at self-control will be successful. He says, for example: 'I do not suggest that this picturing technique [that is, focusing one's attention on certain aspects of the available options rather than others], nor any of the techniques mentioned here, will always be efficacious' (1987, 162, n.6). On Mele's account, then, what makes akratic action possible is that people can fail to exercise their ability of self-control in relevant situations, and that their attempts at self-control can be ineffective.

This raises the question, however, of why people do not always attempt to exercise self-control when they can and why certain attempts at self-control are successful while others are not. Mele holds that this depends on the details of the situation. He illustrates this with the help of the example of Susan (1987, 93-95). Susan goes out for a stroll on campus, despite judging it best not to because she needs to work and also because there have been robberies on campus lately. Mele supposes that Susan makes no attempt at self-control whereas sticking to her intention to stay home and work depends on it. He says: '…in the present case we may seek an explanation in Susan's attentional condition. Perhaps the focus of Susan's attention at a crucial juncture was on the pleasure of the solitary stroll and the dreariness of her present surroundings rather than on her reasons for staying in' (1987, 94). Mele may be perfectly right that a person's attentional condition can play such a role in examples like Susan's. However, this provides no further explanation as to why a person's attentional condition is not directed at the self-controlled alternative at the relevant moment, and, importantly, what explains that a person's attempt at self-control is successful when it is.

In the end, Mele's account does not clarify what is decisive when it comes to whether a person makes an attempt at self-control and, if he does, what makes such an attempt a fruitful one.[34] Mele relies on the concept of self-control to try to make sense of the observation that, while our strongest motivation is often grounded in a better judgment, it is sometimes grounded in a different factor. However, this merely seems to shift the problem: what remains unclear is what explains that a person is successful in using his ability

34 For similar critiques of Mele's account of akratic action, see for example Marcia Homiak (1991, 123), Sarah Buss (1997, 41, n.35), and Sergio Tenenbaum (1999, 887-888).

of self-control to influence his motivational balance in favor of his better judgment.

This kind of problem troubles the third strategy for dealing with the logical puzzle more generally. Denying a principle like Davidson's P2 makes conceptual room for akratic action by stating that better judgment and motivation can come apart. However, if there is no necessary link between better judgment and motivation but it is nevertheless sometimes (or even usually) a better judgment that corresponds with action, then the question comes up of how better judgment and motivation *are* related. Moreover, a similar question arises with regard to every factor that is substituted for a better judgment as the final link in the chain that leads to action (regardless of whether this is, for example, a conceptual or a causal chain), which on Mele's account is the ability of self-control. It seems that ultimately it is impossible to fully understand where motivation comes from. As Sarah Buss puts it: 'These accounts [which I have dubbed 'the third strategy' – PS] describe agents who simply find themselves moved to act in a manner that is incompatible with their own practical conclusions' (1997, 28). Like the former two strategies, then, the third strategy for solving the logical puzzle also faces a problem that seems to be inherent to the strategy itself.

2.3 Conclusion

The possibility of akratic action – more specifically, of strict akratic action – raises a logical puzzle because it is inconsistent with the intuition that a person's better judgment, via motivation, corresponds with action. I have presented the accounts of akratic action offered by Hare, Davidson and Mele to illustrate the three different strategies one can pursue in trying to deal with the logical puzzle: (1) denying the possibility of akratic action, (2) distinguishing between (processes leading to) a judgment that warrants action and (processes leading to) a judgment that a person violates in acting akratically, and (3) denying that there is a necessary connection between better judgment, motivation, and action.

Each of these strategies faces a difficulty, however, which is inherent to the strategy itself. The first strategy does not take the experience of akratic

action truly seriously. With regard to the second strategy, the question arises whether it is really impossible to act against the kind of judgment that supposedly warrants action. And the third strategy, although it can make room for the possibility of akratic action, renders the precise relation between better judgment, motivation, and action unintelligible. Theories concerning action, then, either have a hard time accounting for (all forms of) akratic action or have trouble specifying the precise nature of the relation between better judgment, motivation, and action. All three strategies for dealing with the logical puzzle therefore face a problem that seems impossible to overcome entirely.

Despite the many rich solutions that have been offered in answer to the question of how akratic action is possible, the logical puzzle appears insoluble. Davidson was perhaps more correct than he himself knew in calling the triad of principles that constitute the logical puzzle a paradox. Xavier Vanmechelen observes that the literature on akratic action has not really come much closer to finding a solution to the puzzle (2002, 669), and Jörn Müller even concludes that discussions on the possibility of akratic action have reached an impasse (2009, 755).

This leaves us with the following issue, though: even if we can never theoretically account for the possibility of strict akratic action in a satisfactory way, and it looks like we cannot, the compelling experience of failing to abide by one's better judgment remains. If we are to say anything more about akrasia as it poses a problem in everyday life, we need an alternative way to conceive of it – a way that enables us to talk about it productively without first having to face the logical puzzle.

It is my contention that a character approach to akrasia provides a fruitful alternative. In the next chapter, I show that there are several advantages of regarding akrasia primarily as a character trait instead of primarily as a type of single and isolated action. One of these advantages, so I argue, is that a character account of akrasia can refrain from taking a stance on the logical puzzle of how strict akratic action is possible.

3. TOWARDS A CHARACTER APPROACH TO AKRASIA

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present several advantages of regarding akrasia as a character trait as opposed to regarding it merely as a type of single and isolated action. Recall that by 'character trait' I refer to a stable and intelligent (or reasons-responsive) state characterized by distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking and acting that are morally relevant, such as a person's core commitments, aspirations and ideals. In fact, I want to make the stronger claim that a character approach to akrasia is to be preferred over an 'action approach'.

In contrast to 'character approach', I use the term 'action approach' to refer to the dominant contemporary approach to akrasia, presented in the previous chapter, which focuses on the logical puzzle of how single and isolated strict akratic action is possible. The two approaches are not rivals in the sense that they can exist alongside one another. However, a character approach has the advantage that it can address the same philosophical worries as the action approach and on top of this can attend to other issues that akrasia raises as well. This is not to say that akratic action is always expressive of a character trait. It may very well sometimes occur in isolation. However, even though a single akratic action can be troublesome enough as it is, akrasia as a stable and morally objectionable tendency is of even greater concern in everyday life.

I start by explaining that there are three reasons why an action approach cannot do justice to akrasia as it is of most concern in everyday life (3.2). I then go on to show that a character approach does not face the

same obstacles. A character approach has four clear advantages over an action approach. The first three together entail that a character approach better captures what akrasia is about in a person's life (3.3). The fourth reason is that it can refrain from taking a stance on the logical puzzle (3.4). This observation is not meant as a contribution to solving the logical puzzle but rather points out that a character approach can remain agnostic about it. Lastly, I address the situationism challenge to character (3.5). Situationists claim that it is unlikely that character traits exist. If they are right about this, my project is bound to fail from the start. I argue, however, that the empirical research on which situationists base their claim does not actually support their conclusion about character. The arguments that I present in this chapter show that it is highly fruitful for philosophers to approach akrasia as a character trait.

3.2 Limits of an action approach

Luc Bovens points out that the contemporary philosophical literature on akrasia does not offer any help to people with an akratic character: 'When it comes to therapy, philosophy has been somewhat of a disappointment' (1999, 230). Perhaps Bovens is looking in the wrong place. It seems that if one is searching for specific self-control techniques, psychology is a better fit. Empirical research sometimes comes up with good suggestions for how to exercise self-control. Peter Gollwitzer (1999), for example, has found that the formation of implementation intentions – specifying the where, when and how of implementing an intended goal – helps a person to complete tasks; Walter Mischel and Bert Moore (1973) have revealed that focusing on the informative rather than the arousing properties of an object – say abstract qualities instead of tastiness – helps a person to delay gratification.[1] There might, however, be another reason why contemporary literature on the topic has thus far not been much help to people with an akratic character: it does not deal with what makes akrasia so troublesome in daily life. It does

1 For the *status quaestionis* of the psychological literature on self-control, see the handbook on self-regulation by Kathleen Vohs and Roy Baumeister (2011).

not concern itself with questions of therapy and the good life.[2] What is most troublesome is akrasia as a recurring phenomenon, but philosophy has been overly preoccupied with the theoretical challenge of the logical puzzle.

An action approach cannot do justice to the problem that akrasia poses in everyday life for three reasons. First of all, its focus on the logical puzzle prevents it from seeing that the actual predicament of akrasia lies in its recurrent form. Furthermore, due to its exclusive focus on the possibility of strict cases, an action approach overlooks the importance of the differences between the kinds of objects over which people lack control. Thirdly, an action approach tends to rule out diachronic cases of akratic action (that is, cases that are necessarily stretched out over time, most of which are 'non-strict'), disregarding the fact that these can actually greatly disturb a person's life.

To start with the first reason: an action approach takes single and isolated strict akratic action as a point of departure. In this form, akratic action poses the largest puzzle to action theory. However, as long as no satisfactory answer to the question of how such action is possible is to be found – and, as I have shown, the prospects look grim – an action approach will continue to go around in circles trying to account for strict akratic action.

An action approach can certainly allow for the possibility of a person's acting against his better judgment many times. However, the logical puzzle does not go away if strict akratic actions form a chain. Each particular case still raises the same question. Hence, as a means of solving the logical puzzle, an action approach has nothing to gain by shifting its focus to a pattern of strict akratic actions.

Secondly, all examples with the structure of a strict akratic action are equally interesting to an action approach. It is indifferent to whether the example is about watching a television show, or painting the shed, or struggling with being overweight, or adultery. The logical puzzle is about the formal structure underlying these different actions. The moral status of an akratic action is considered irrelevant and sometimes even distracting.

Most telling in this context is Donald Davidson's attempt to deprive the notion of akrasia of any specific moral meaning. For this purpose,

2 I say more on therapy, character development and stagnation in Chapter Six.

Davidson sketches the situation of a person who is in bed at night and suddenly remembers that he has forgotten to brush his teeth. The person does not want to disturb a good night's sleep but is also concerned about his dental health. He weighs his reasons and judges that in this instance it is best to stay in bed. Nonetheless, he gets up and brushes his teeth (1969, 101). Davidson may be right that conceptually, this example is as puzzling as any other: someone freely and knowingly acts against his better judgment. Morally, however, the toothbrusher example is not very serious. It is not usually a big deal if someone gets a bit less sleep now and then. (This might change if it happens regularly.)[3] Of course, Davidson would not maintain that the toothbrusher example is on the same moral level as an example about adultery. He only wants to show that akratic action need not be moral at all. I do not deny this. I want to emphasize, however, that instances of akrasia can have the same structure while nevertheless taking up different places in a moral hierarchy.

The moral status of a certain case (ranging from the non-moral to the morally very serious) is relevant to an account of akrasia because it is part of what determines how strongly we criticize someone for his lack of control. For the most part, philosophers hold that all akratic actions are criticizable due to their irrational structure. Justin Gosling, for example, tries to capture the nature of this irrationality and concludes that it lies 'in not acting on reasons that you take seriously' (1990, 198). Sometimes, an example of akrasia may only be criticizable because someone's behavior has not come about in the way that one would expect of a rational being. However, alongside considerations of irrationality and other factors, it can matter for the purposes of evaluating a person whether he is akratic with regard to doing the dishes, or paying bills, or extramarital sex, etcetera. A character trait, on my understanding, describes how well or poorly someone does with regard to distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting that are morally relevant. A person's akratic character might be morally worse

3 I would not like to encourage the person in the example, however, to stick to his better judgment but never to brush his teeth in the evening again. Self-control requires of this person not only that he resist getting out of bed but also that he finds a way to remember to brush his teeth before going to bed.

than someone else's in virtue of being directed at certain objects rather than others.

Thirdly, an action approach unduly restricts the notion of akrasia. It basically identifies akrasia with *strict* akratic action. There is, however, a wider variety of actions that can be described as 'failing to abide by one's better judgment'.

A prominent example in this respect is procrastination. Sarah Stroud (2010) argues that procrastination is not a form of akrasia. Her argument is based on the observation that *synchronicity* is a pivotal part of what she calls the 'classic' definition of akratic action.[4] Akrasia on this classic definition is the same as what I have been calling 'strict akratic action'. Synchronicity entails the simultaneity that is essential to a strict definition: a person acts in one way while at the very same time judging it best to act in a different way. Stroud points out that procrastination, on the other hand, is a *diachronic* phenomenon. It is necessarily stretched out over time. She concludes that a classic definition of akratic action cannot include procrastination. Being stretched out over time is essential to the latter, whereas 'considerations of time are inessential to the possibility of akrasia' (2010, 59).[5]

However, procrastination is often one of the first things that people mention as an example of 'failing to abide by one's better judgment'. Indeed, in *The Thief of Time* (Chrisoula Andreou and Mark White 2010a) – a volume dedicated entirely to procrastination – several authors intimate that procrastination is a form of akrasia (it is noteworthy in this context that in *The Thief of Time* the primary concern is irrational delay and not

4 Stroud calls this definition 'classic' to distinguish it from Richard Holton's alternative definition of weakness of will. Holton defines it as a form of intention violation. Stroud denies that procrastination is a form of weakness of will on Holton's definition as well.

5 Note that synchronic akratic action can also be stretched out over time. Being aware of the fact that you judge it best not to have another beer might last as long as it takes to drink the beer. It is not clear whether Stroud agrees. Be that as it may, Stroud's point is not that synchronic akratic action cannot be stretched out over time, but just that time is an irrelevant feature here. She says that '[a]n "instantaneous" agent – an agent who was destined to exist for only one moment, and knew this – could, in that one moment, be akratic' (2010, 59).

strict akratic action). Duncan MacIntosch writes: 'It is natural to class procrastination in with weakness of will' (2010, 69). Similarly, Mark White suggests that '[p]rocrastination may be the most common and widespread instance of weakness of will' (2010, 216).[6] One is bound to conclude that a definition of akrasia that rules out a case that so naturally belongs to its realm is unsatisfactory, to say the least.

3.3 Advantages of a character approach

As will be clear, a character approach to akrasia does not face the problems outlined in the previous section. A character approach has four advantages over an action approach, the first three of which are the converse of the limits to an action approach discussed above. In addition, a character approach has the theoretical advantage that it does not necessarily have to address the logical puzzle.

3.3.1 Repetition and moral evaluation

A character approach is directed towards akrasia as a stable and morally objectionable tendency to fail to abide by one's better judgment. It therefore comes with an interest in recurring akrasia (first advantage) and its morally relevant aspects (second advantage). These advantages are intertwined because a character trait has both a descriptive and an evaluative side. A character trait not only *describes* how a person is prone to feel, think, and act but also determines how a person – at least in this respect – is to be *morally evaluated*.

Readers may have reservations about whether the fact that a character approach is directed towards morally relevant aspects of akrasia is indeed an advantage. Davidson warns against a specific focus on moral weakness – that

6 In the same volume, this is also implied by Don Ross (2010, 44), Christine Tappolet (2010, 120), and Jennifer Baker (2010, 174). Olav Gjelsvik sides with Stroud, but he too seems to rely on a strict definition of akratic action (2010, 114).

is, on acting against a moral judgment (1969, 101). John Austin also complains about 'the grotesque confusion of moral weakness with weakness of will' (1956, 24, n.13). Let me start by showing that a character approach does not restrict akrasia to a tendency to act against certain kinds of judgments alone.

3.3.1.1 An unfounded worry about the moral orientation of a character approach

The concern might be that because of its focus on akrasia as a moral problem, a character approach dismisses both common examples of judgment-violation that only seem to involve a prudential failure and unconventional examples in which the *outcome* is generally considered to be good moral conduct. The worry that a character approach excludes certain instances of akrasia is unfounded, however.

First of all, a character approach can include inclinations to act against any kind of judgment. The content of the better judgment is not the only thing that is of relevance to the moral evaluation of akrasia. As I will show in a moment, repetition is a morally relevant factor too. An instance of akrasia that is innocent and morally irrelevant in isolation can still render a person's character morally objectionable when it is repetitive.

Furthermore, I allow for a broad meaning of 'moral' that covers both the interpersonal domain as well as matters that are related to a person's flourishing. Actions that harm others are the first to spring to mind when we think about examples of immoral action. It is obvious that akratic actions that result in lying and cheating are instances of moral weakness. However, the moral domain is broader than interpersonal matters. Virtue ethical theories emphasize this most strongly. Daniel Russell summarizes that these theories aim to 'grasp which character traits are the virtues by understanding which traits practical reasoning recommends as essential to living a fulfilling human life' (2013, 7-8). In the Aristotelian tradition, this includes other-directed virtues but also a virtue such as moderation, which is the cultivation of one's own bodily appetites for food, drink and sex (see for example Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.10-12). Virtue ethics is therefore concerned both with being considerate to others and with taking

good care of oneself. Kant likewise does not restrict his ethical theory to interpersonal matters to the extent that he distinguishes duties to others from duties to oneself (*Metaphysik der Sitten* (*MS*) 6: 421-447). The duty not to commit suicide is well known (*MS* 6: 422-424), but he also talks of the duty to be moderate with regard to stimulants and food (*MS* 6: 427-428) and the duty to develop one's natural talents (*MS* 6: 444-446). Hence, matters of personal flourishing can be considered morally relevant. Being prone to give in to bodily appetites (such as chocolate cravings or the desire to have another beer) or being prone to laziness violates the moral ideal of the virtuous person and the duties one has to oneself. Thus the character approach's moral orientation does not prevent it from addressing any of the common examples of akrasia.

Can a character approach also acknowledge, however, instances of judgment-violation that result in action that we generally find (morally) desirable? I shall stick mostly to conventional examples of akrasia because I suspect that people can easily relate to them and that these are the kinds of cases that we worry about most in everyday life. However, as Jonathan Bennett remarks, '…rotten principles may be as difficult to keep as decent ones' (1974, 124). Consider the following case, described by Eric Snider:

> A judge reckons it wrong to give blacks fair trials, and so decides to deny fair trials to blacks. He also desires to advance his position as a judge by moving to a higher court. But, in order to advance his position, he must, though he reckons it wrong, give blacks fair trials. So whenever a black comes to trial, due to his desire to advance his position, he treats the person fairly. (1986, 267)

Clearly, the judge's judgment about black people and fair trials is incorrect and immoral. However, it seems that, on the one hand, in going against his judgment due to his desire to secure a better position (provided he does not see this as an overriding reason for action), the judge's action is nonetheless akratic. On the other hand, his action is usually considered a desirable *outcome*. This might give the impression that the judge knows what the right thing to do is after all and acts on this knowledge.

It has been asked, especially in the literature on 'inverse akrasia', whether such unconventional examples of failing to abide by one's better

judgment are in fact to be regarded as instances of akrasia.[7] The idea is that it can sometimes be rational to violate one's better judgment (or in any case more rational than acting in accordance). In particular, authors have suggested that such a violation of one's better judgment is rational and hence not akratic if a person's action is more coherent with his overall set of beliefs and desires than his better judgment is (Arpaly 2000), or if a desire does a better job at 'tracking' the right reasons for action than deliberation does (Jones 2003). The most commonly cited example of inverse akrasia is Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Huck judges that he should turn in the runaway slave Jim. Due to his sympathy for Jim, he fails to do so when the opportunity comes along. The inverse akrasia interpretation maintains that Huck's sympathy represents what he truly holds as best, even though he does not recognize it himself at that moment. Examples like Huck's would then be construed as cases in which someone acts on a better reason for action than the one on which his better judgment is based.

I am not persuaded that akratic action can sometimes be rational. As Sabine Döring points out, '…in order to be rational, an agent must satisfy the condition that he *would* so authorize the action, were he asked to do so' (2010, 295).[8] If asked, Huck would say that he should turn Jim in. In Twain's novel, he acknowledges years later that he did the right thing in helping Jim out.[9] In the relevant behavioral context, however, Huck could

7 This term was coined by Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder (1999). Arpaly (2000) in particular has stimulated discussion on inverse akrasia. There are, however, others who express similar views. See, for example, Robert Audi (1990), Alison McIntyre (1990), Karen Jones (2003), Christine Tappolet (2003), and John Brunero (2013).

8 James Montmarquet (2012) makes a similar point about Huck Finn.

9 Döring observes that even though akratic action is always irrational, akratic conflict can sometimes lead to new and improved insights. She holds that this is what happens with Huckleberry Finn: 'in the end, Huck comes out of it [the conflict between his better judgment that he should turn Jim in and his feelings of sympathy for Jim] with new and better reasons, by which he may then guide his actions' (2010, 297). Annemarie Kalis also remarks that 'failures of agency might be seen as signals that tell us that we might want to rethink our evaluative assessments' (2011, 164). Xavier Vanmechelen (2000, 302-308) and Martin Seel (2001, 618) discuss similar ideas. I agree that akrasia can trigger reflection on one's better judgment and that this can occasionally be productive.

not have realized this given the better judgment he had at the time. We may disapprove of Huck's standpoint, but this does not make it rational for him to go against it.

It is not a problem for a character approach, however, to accept that certain actions and stable inclinations are akratic – and, on a character approach, thus in some sense morally criticizable – despite a desirable behavioral result. Morally speaking, we may be even more concerned about such unconventional instances of akrasia than about common examples, for it seems that people in examples like that of the judge and Huck Finn go wrong in two ways: not only do they fail to follow their better judgment, they also do not recognize what a fair and sound judgment looks like (cf. Snider 1986, 274). The fact that the outcome is desirable does not compensate for this. It is not my aim to pinpoint what exactly constitutes a sound and morally good judgment. However, I insist that certain instances of akrasia involve a double failure. Moral improvement requires of people like the judge and Huck Finn not only that they gain greater self-control but also that they come to see that their better judgment or general standard for action is flawed. After all, even though a high level of self-control is an important achievement in moral development, by itself it does not make a person good. Consider the image of a Nazi who is very self-controlled in carrying out his cruel aims (cf. Thomas Hill 1986, 93). Some people with an akratic character may have to both overcome their lack of control and change their standard for action in order to become the kind of person we can rightfully admire.

A character account thus recognizes that for akrasia it matters most that a person fails to abide by a better judgment of which he is himself strongly convinced, regardless of the content of the better judgment. This subjective criterion is all-important. However, for the moral evaluation of akrasia we can subsequently turn to more objective criteria. Is the better judgment that a person endorses plausibly correct or clearly misguided? Is the behavior relatively innocent or quite serious given how it affects other people or a person's own flourishing? To conclude, it is the irrational structure of failing to abide by one's better judgment that qualifies an action as akratic, even on a character account. The content of a specific case, together with other factors such as repetition, influences how serious we consider the akrasia to be.

3.3.1.2 Character traits and repetitive behavior

One advantage of a character approach to akrasia is that it is naturally directed towards the aspect of repetition. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, I think of the character trait of akrasia as a stable condition with positive ontological features of its own that can influence how a person typically thinks, feels and acts.

It must be said, however, that even though there is a natural connection between character traits and repetitive behavior, this connection is not a necessary one. A character trait need not manifest very often. First of all, trait-relevant situations might be rare. Trait-based behavior is triggered by certain conditions, such as the strength of competing motivation and the presence of an object of desire or aversion. As Christian Miller and Angela Knobel phrase it: 'It is a feature of dispositions in general [of which they consider character traits a subclass] that they are sensitive to certain *stimulus events* or *stimulus conditions* specific to the given disposition' (2015, 22).[10] The relevant conditions may not obtain very often. As a consequence, someone's character might never or only rarely reveal itself. Consider, for example, a person with an akratic character who is in prison and is deprived of all resources over which he could lack control. The prisoner has an akratic character, but based on how he currently acts we would never know this.

Furthermore, even when the relevant conditions obtain, a character trait does not always lead to a corresponding action. As became apparent in the discussion of Alfred Mele's theory of action in Chapter Two, factors other than character can influence action, such as a person's attentional condition at the moment of action. For this reason, Mele says that 'characterological explanations of actions are at best promissory notes of a sort' (1987, 58; cf. 107). A character trait may have a strong influence on behavior, but it does not necessarily determine how someone acts.

Conversely, the fact that someone exhibits repeated akratic behavior is not a conclusive sign of an akratic character. Theoretically, it is possible that

10 Miller and Knobel point out that certain background conditions can also play an important role. A mental illness such as depression can interfere with a character trait, for example (2015, 22).

a self-controlled person could keep finding himself in situations where he does not know how to exercise self-control. Perhaps he often finds himself in new and surprising circumstances. Repetitive action is not ultimate proof of a character trait.

Having said that, one can expect that a character trait usually leads to corresponding behavior in trait-relevant situations. As Miller and Knobel write: '…the causal activities of trait dispositions [that is, character traits] can create expectations about the person's future behavior in both himself and others' (2015, 23). More importantly, I am mostly interested in akrasia as a character trait insofar as it actually manifests itself with regularity, because even though single akratic actions can be troublesome enough as it is, akratic behavior poses an even larger problem in everyday life when it is repetitive.

3.3.1.3 Repetitiveness as a morally relevant aspect

A character approach to akrasia focuses on repetition for another reason as well. A character trait not only describes how a person is prone to act but is also a basis for the moral evaluation of who a person is. Among other things, it is relevant for moral evaluation whether a person fails to abide by his better judgment incidentally or repeatedly.

Akrasia especially raises moral criticism when it forms a pattern. When we praise or blame someone for what he does, it is moral practice to take into consideration whether he acted in or out of character. A punctual person who is late for an appointment is more easily excused than someone who always makes others wait. A murderer who is generally very peaceful is judged less harshly than a murderer who is the violent type (this often also influences legal punishment). Similarly, a person who fails to put his judgment into practice only once is blamed less harshly than someone who violates his better judgment on a regular basis.

Taken as isolated cases, most of the regular examples of akratic action in the literature are not worth worrying about. Think of all those examples that have to do with eating, drinking alcohol, smoking, exercising, social activity, laziness, and so on. The temptation to eat a piece of chocolate cake, have another beer, go to a party, or watch television prevails over the 'better'

alternative of sticking to a healthy diet, keeping a clear head, studying for an exam, or doing physical exercise. In daily life, the impact of these cases as single actions is negligible. The point of sticking to a healthy diet, for example, is to be healthy, and this is not threatened by succumbing to the occasional chocolate bar. Furthermore, morally speaking, one-time akratic actions of the kind under consideration here are irrelevant. As single actions, they neither bear on the life of other people nor influence a person's own development. An incidental lapse with regard to things such as eating, drinking, and exercising is therefore usually not of much concern.[11]

This is not to say that I encourage such incidental lapses. For one thing, you never know whether a single action will be the first in a pattern.[12] George Ainslie, for example, describes how people can make use of a mechanism to bundle choices into categories (2001, 78-85). This mechanism can help with the exercise of self-control: someone chooses an action as if it is the first one of a series of similar actions, and this makes him follow through with it. However, the same mechanism makes people vulnerable. If you regard an action as a precedent for how you will act in the future, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case of akrasia, this can have disastrous consequences, as Ainslie points out: 'A lapse that you see as a precedent reduces your hope for self-control in similar situations in the future, a reduction that recursively reduces your power of self-control in those situations' (2001, 160). Self-control should not amount to overly rigid behavior either, however (see also Christine Swanton 1997, 89 and Joel Kupperman 1991, 140). It is sometimes good to make an exception. After having worked hard and finishing his final exam, a student may justifiably judge it best to let himself go and party all night. However, an ideally self-controlled person makes an exception not only because desire pulls him in that direction but because he recognizes when it is called for.

By contrast, the examples of akratic action of the kind described above are of much greater concern when the behavior is repetitive. First

11 Given, of course, that there are no other factors in play, such as a promise to accompany a friend to the gym.

12 Jeanne Peijnenburg (2007) argues that an action may even become part of a specific pattern only in retrospect.

of all, in repetitive form, there can be serious negative consequences. For example, someone who is consistently lazy may fail to obtain the academic degree he is striving for. Secondly, and this is the main thing I want to point out, if akratic actions of the kind under consideration form a pattern, this bears on how the person is to be morally evaluated. Akrasia as a character trait testifies to the fact that someone is the kind of person who – in certain sphere(s) of life – fails to follow his better judgment. In general, we do not admire people who show little self-control. More particularly, examples of akrasia that are innocent in isolation might hinder moral development and virtuous behavior when they become part of a pattern. A person who is akratic with regard to eating, drinking, studying or household tasks falls short, for example, of possible moral ideals such as moderation and industry.[13] Such a person can be said to have a morally objectionable character trait.

There are also akratic actions that already constitute a problem when they occur only once. Think of examples that have very pronounced moral significance, such as those that involve adultery, fraud, or endangering others. These actions are morally reproachable, whether they happen once or often. Furthermore, they can have devastating consequences as single actions. A one-time failure to resist a drink when one needs to drive can result in a person's killing someone in a car crash. Hence, certain instances of akrasia can have a big impact and are also morally objectionable as single actions.

Even with these examples of akrasia, however, it can make a difference for moral evaluation whether they happen incidentally or repeatedly. Persistent unfaithfulness is usually considered worse than cheating only once. And, someone who commits fraud on one occasion is likely to be punished less harshly than someone who commits such a crime systematically. Incidental

13 People who fall short in these ways are sometimes still admired. Many famous actors and musicians, for example, make the news with stories of alcohol and drugs abuse but nonetheless continue to enjoy a large fan base. This does not automatically mean that the fans do not value a virtue such as moderation. In their eyes, perhaps, the talent and sheer fame of the celebrity compensates for the shortcomings. Fans also tend to idealize their idols. This may lead them to ignore the faults of the celebrity. Or perhaps they embrace the faults of the celebrity because it shows that he or she is less than perfect and very much human.

cases, no matter how serious, can still be seen as a mistake that someone can learn from, or as an excess that he will try to avoid in the future. Frequent behavior is a sign of an underlying stable condition. It reveals that someone is the kind of person who is bound to act like that again. Hence, even though there are akratic actions that are morally objectionable as one-off events, here too the moral blame increases when the behavior forms a pattern.

In sum, certain akratic actions only become a problem in everyday life through repetition, but repetition is always an aggravating factor for moral evaluation. Akrasia as a character trait can have serious negative consequences. More importantly, a person with an akratic character has a stable inclination that is morally objectionable.

3.3.1.4 About further morally relevant aspects

The focus of a character approach on moral evaluation applies to all morally relevant aspects of akrasia as a character trait, not only to the aspect of repetition. As I have already mentioned, an important factor is the kind of object that is involved. I pointed out that it can matter a great deal for moral evaluation what kind of object a person is prone to lack control over.

For the moment, I will not discuss any further factors that are relevant to the moral evaluation of akrasia. I come back to this when I discuss Aristotle's account of akrasia as a character trait. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII, he indicates several possible factors. For now, it suffices to have shown that contrary to an action approach, a character approach can address the fact that different kinds of akrasia constitute a moral hierarchy.

3.3.2 A wide variety of manifestations

A third advantage of a character approach is that it acknowledges that akrasia as a character trait can have a wide variety of manifestations. The character trait can be expressed not only through strict akratic action but through all

sorts of actions that are naturally described as 'failing to abide by one's better judgment'.

Thomas Hill makes a similar claim. He states that a focus on akrasia and character directs us towards 'a somewhat different range of cases than those that have so puzzled action theorists' (1986, 93). The cases that Hill has in mind, however, do not necessarily involve a failure to abide by one's better judgment. Most examples that he mentions rather come down to a failure to properly form or maintain a judgment in the first place, or to a failure in the manner of execution. He holds that apart from 'acting with full awareness contrary to what one judges best', weakness can reveal itself in several other ways. He mentions 'half-hearted efforts' (acting but not trying very hard), 'weak resolves' (forming vague resolutions), 'surrendering after a struggle' (changing one's mind while giving in to temptation), 'fading will' (a disappearing judgment) and 'unstable will' (continually changing one's judgment) (1986, 95-98).

Here, I restrict myself to actions that involve a complete failure to abide by one's better judgment, for these cases qualify most naturally as akrasia. I discuss three so-called 'diachronic' alternatives to strict akratic action that fit the bill: procrastination, temporary judgment-shift and akrasia through self-deception or rationalization.

3.3.2.1 Procrastination and considerations of time

Procrastination is essentially diachronic. It is necessarily stretched out over time. For this reason – as I mentioned above – Sarah Stroud denies that it is a form of 'classic' (read: strict) akratic action, which is essentially synchronic. However, it is natural to consider procrastination a form of akrasia, at least when it involves violating a better judgment.[14]

14 Procrastination may still not entirely overlap with akrasia, for there could be instances of irrational delay that do not involve the violation of a better judgment, for example instances in which someone postpones making a decision or forming a better judgment to begin with.

A character approach has no trouble with the diachronic features of procrastination. Akrasia as a character trait is itself diachronic, since it is a stable condition. This implies that it covers a long period of time, potentially as long as a person's lifespan (at least counting from the age of which a person has a fully formed character). There is therefore no reason to exclude as manifestations actions that are by themselves extended over time, including procrastination. Procrastination can cover a shorter or a longer period of time. Examples range from an employee who postpones handing in his letter of resignation until tomorrow despite the fact that he holds that it is best to do so today, to a writer who keeps postponing the completion of his book for years. In both cases, the procrastination can be occasional or repetitive. Even when procrastination covers a longer period of time, it may only be peculiar to a specific project. However, my point is that when procrastination forms a pattern, it can be considered a manifestation of the character trait of akrasia.[15]

When a better judgment is in play, procrastination can be described as a diachronic form of 'failing to abide by one's better judgment'. It is some form of irrational delay, although it is difficult to specify the exact conditions under which putting things off is irrational. We cannot do everything at once. Sometimes we need to postpone certain things, and it is not always bad to leave something to the last minute. So when, exactly, does something count as procrastination? One indication that the delay is irrational is whether someone acts later than he thinks he should.[16] As Chrisoula Andreou states, procrastination 'involves leaving too late or putting off indefinitely what one should, relative to one's goals and information, have done sooner' (2010, 206-207). A procrastinator's better judgment involves a time specification as one of its main elements. The better judgment specifies not only that it is

15 It is striking that a considerable number of the authors of *The Thief of Time* hold that procrastination is often persistent, or at least that in its recurrent form it is of the greatest concern. See Christoula Andreou and Mark White (2010b, 3), George Ainslie (2010, 13), Don Ross (2010, 44), Christine Tappolet (2010, 122), Sergio Tenenbaum (2010, 130), Mark White (2010, 216), and Manuel Utset (2010).

16 It gets more complicated when the judgment about the need to act at a certain time is itself not formed in a proper way (see Andreou and White 2010b, 4), but let us assume for the moment that it is.

best to do something but also that it is best to do so before or at a certain point in time, or within a certain timespan.

Its diachronic nature does not prohibit procrastination from taking a strict form, though. A person who postpones something despite judging it best to do it earlier may be very much aware of this.[17] Unlike what is often implied, synchronicity and diachronicity do not exclude one another. Features of actions that are *stretched out over time* (diachronic) can nonetheless be present *at the same time* (synchronic). This does not mean that with strict procrastination someone has to have his better judgment in mind all the time. It suffices, I would say, if he is aware of it at the relevant moments. For example, someone who puts off starting work on a paper that is due in two weeks may think of this on every occasion that he could be writing but instead turns on the television, organizes his cupboard, etcetera. What matters is that the different elements of a conflict can be simultaneously present in someone's mind for a period of time. Procrastination can hence be a diachronic form of *strict* akratic action.

But if diachronicity does not exclude synchronicity, why then are authors with an action approach at such great pains to keep considerations of time out of the 'classic' definition of strict akratic action? The crux is that diachronicity opens up the possibility of non-simultaneity. Diachronic akrasia can be synchronic, but it does not need to be. If akrasia takes place over time, it is possible that the one element of the conflict will be present only *after* the other. A person in that case does *not* act in one way while at the very same time judging it best to act otherwise. The conflict between better judgment and competing motivation can in some evaluative sense be called simultaneous because a person's previously formed or implicit better judgment pertains to the moment of action. Psychologically speaking, however, the conflict is not simultaneous in the sense that the person is unaware of his better judgment at the relevant moment. Diachronicity does not rule out simultaneity, but for an action approach the problem is that it does not guarantee the strictness that authors seek in a definition of akrasia.

A character approach, on the other hand, can take both strict and non-strict akratic actions on board. An action that is characteristic of a person

17 Tappolet also notes this and talks of 'clear-eyed procrastination' (2010, 121).

who is disposed to fail to put his better judgment into action qualifies as a manifestation of an akratic character in strict and non-strict cases alike. A character approach can hence incorporate both strict and non-strict akratic actions because they are equally expressive of a stable condition of akrasia.

Procrastination can take both a strict and a non-strict form. Other diachronic manifestations are necessarily non-strict. I have in mind, first of all, actions in which a person temporarily replaces his better judgment with another. In a second type of case, a person does not replace his better judgment but temporarily sets it aside or does not think about it.

3.3.2.2 Temporary judgment shift

In the case of a temporary judgment shift, someone temporarily replaces his better judgment with another. At the moment of action, he changes his mind about what it is best to do in this situation. However, the change of mind is not permanent. After the action, the initial judgment is restored, and the person regrets his action and disapproves of it.

A well-known description of temporary judgment shift is George Ainslie's theory of 'hyperbolic discounting'.[18] The theory describes how a preference for a certain object of desire is temporarily replaced by another. The starting point is the observation that people often choose smaller, more proximate rewards over larger later ones. Ainslie agrees with economic models of action that desire for an object increases with proximity. However, he rejects the idea that the desire increases exponentially. The basic idea of hyperbolic discounting is that when an object of desire draws nearer in time, the desire for it not only strengthens but increases dramatically (it makes a steep curve). As a result, Ainslie says that 'you'll tend to prefer smaller, earlier rewards to larger, later ones temporarily, during the time that they're imminent' (2001, 38).

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18 Some authors who write on akrasia build on or have a similar theory to Ainslie's. See, for example, David Pugmire in Pears and Pugmire (1982), Frank Jackson (1984), and Jon Elster (1985). Pugmire and Jackson are 'akrasia-skeptics': their descriptions of temporary judgment shifts are meant as substitutes for strict akratic action.

Ainslie holds that his theory of hyperbolic discounting describes what happens in cases of akrasia (2001, 39).[19] Someone has a judgment that it is best to pursue a larger later reward. When a smaller object of desire is imminent, he temporarily replaces this judgment with the judgment that it is best to pursue the object that is closer to him in time. He ends up violating the former judgment and following the latter. If Ainslie is correct that this is akrasia, then it is a non-strict form: the judgment that a person fails to abide by is only in place before and after the action, not during.

There is a challenge if we want to consider temporary judgment shifts as instances of akrasia, however. On what grounds can we assume that by a person's own standards his prior judgment has a higher authority than his current one? In order for akrasia to occur, there must be reason to believe that the prior judgment represents a person's take on the matter better than the judgment at the moment of action.

The fact that the 'new' better judgment is only temporary raises suspicion. It is often rational to change one's mind, for example because of new information or further deliberation. However, the temporary judgment that is formed in the case of hyperbolic discounting is directly based on desire. Furthermore, if the new reasons are convincing and the change of mind expresses a person's new viewpoint, one would expect the judgment to last. Instead, a person quickly reinstalls his prior judgment after the action and regrets his action.

Even though a temporary judgment is suspicious, it may nonetheless be reliable. As Barbara Guckes points out, there are two options. People can overestimate their desires in the heat of the moment, but they can also underestimate their preferences for certain options when they are not in the concrete situation (2005, 186-187). Consider a woman who changes her view on the use of anesthesia during childbirth while in active labor. Beforehand, she holds that it is best not to use anesthesia. She is of the opinion that childbirth without anesthesia is more natural and that its use

19 Ainslie states that hyperbolic discounting is the basic impulse for action (2001, 38). However, he does not claim that there is no way to counteract this impulse. A large part of his book *Breakdown of Will* is dedicated to the mechanism of willpower and the downsides that, according to him, come with this mechanism.

jeopardizes the bond between mother and child. This is her view before the moment of action, and she reverts to it at some point after the child is born. During childbirth, however, she changes her mind based on the pain she experiences. It is not too farfetched to think that her judgment at the moment of action is more reliable than her prior judgment. It is based on the intensification of a desire to relieve pain, but in the case at hand this seems like a good reason to change one's mind. Before labor, the woman probably underestimates the pain, and afterwards the memory of it fades away. Only at the moment of childbirth itself can she take the real amount of pain into consideration. Her prior judgment does not seem very fit for a situation she has never or only seldom experienced before. Then again, she might have given her prior judgment much thought, which surely counts for something. So which judgment expresses her actual standpoint?

There is no simple answer to this. One might argue that when a prior judgment represents a person's firm, long-term commitment, it has the highest authority. This sounds especially convincing in the case of a commitment to avoid the kind of situation in which you expect that the temporary judgment shift will arise.[20] For example, someone may judge it best not to have chocolate in the house to avoid being tempted to eat it. For this argument to work, however, we would need a theory of why agency is to be identified with a person's long-term commitment rather than his state of mind at the moment of action.[21] I will not try to develop such a theory here. Moreover, I am not convinced that a long-term commitment is always most representative. A theory on the status of agency would need to account for exceptions like possibly the childbirth example outlined above. It would need to explain when a prior judgment has the highest authority and when

20 A better judgment in that case has a similar purpose as that which Richard Holton ascribes to resolutions. He says: 'Resolutions serve to overcome the desires or beliefs that the agent fears they will form by the time they come to act, desires or beliefs that will inhibit them from acting as they now plan' (2009, 77). Unlike Holton, I am mainly interested in resolutions and other intentions insofar as they represent a better judgment.

21 I thank Michael Bratman for pointing this out to me. Bratman's own work on planning agency would be a promising starting point for such a theory (see, for example, *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* (1987)).

a temporary judgment is more reliable.[22]

In the context of a character account of akrasia, this difficulty is not all too worrisome, however. An akratic condition is likely to manifest itself in a pattern of behavior. If it expresses itself through temporary judgment shifts, the person who suffers from this condition has faced a temporary change of mind in similar situations quite often. Each time, he has a better judgment that in this kind of situation it is best to behave in a certain way; when the moment arrives, however, his preference changes. Afterwards, he reverts to his earlier judgment. He sticks with his better judgment despite the fact that it has been put to the test repeatedly. This makes it highly likely that for him, the judgment prior to action has the highest authority. The regret he feels over his actions strengthens this even more. If we rely on a person's own attitude towards his behavior, it seems fair to say that if he hangs on to a better judgment or standard for action that he has had ample opportunity to abandon, then it truly represents where he stands.

Hence, on a character approach a temporary judgment shift can be considered a non-strict form of akratic action. If a temporary judgment shift is recurrent, it is plausible that the prior and intermittent judgment accurately represents a person's view.

3.3.2.3 Akrasia through self-deception or rationalization

In a second form of non-strict akratic action, a person does not replace his better judgment with another but temporarily sets it aside or does not think about it. The chocolate cake looks so tasty that a person becomes convinced that he has good reason to make an exception to his diet in the current situation. Or, all of his attention is drawn to how good a piece of the cake will taste, and he gives the diet no further thought at the moment. Under the

22 Let me stress that I do not wish to identify a person solely with his better judgment. Desires, actions, akratic behavior, and so on, can be very much a person's own. In this context, I am just most concerned with taking seriously a person's own perspective on his behavior.

influence of competing motivation, at the moment of action a person can fail to apply a general standard to the relevant situation or can push his better judgment to the back of his mind. One way to describe these instances of akrasia is in terms of self-deception.

One might wonder whether it is fruitful to turn to self-deception, though, for it has raised something of a logical puzzle of its own. Xavier Vanmechelen, for example, describes it as the 'cognitive' counterpart of (the strict form of) akrasia (2000, 209). If self-deception is impossible, then so is akrasia through self-deception. A character approach does not have much to gain by incorporating another manifestation the possibility of which is widely questioned.

Indeed, self-deception can be a puzzling phenomenon. The two most common ways of understanding self-deception are paradoxical (see, for example, Vanmechelen 2000, 229-241). First of all, self-deception is often described as a situation in which someone believes *p* and not-*p* at the same time. Secondly, it is common to try to understand self-deception on the basis of a model of interpersonal deception. Interpersonal deception is intentional. Someone who deceives himself would then intentionally deceive himself *and* be deceived. Moreover, as the deceiver he knows that which he deceives himself about, but as the deceived he does not know it. This seems impossible. On these conceptions, then, it is hard to make sense of self-deception.

This difficulty can be avoided by selecting a notion of self-deception that is not paradoxical. Julius Schälike (2004) suggests that in order to account for akrasia in terms of self-deception, it is most fruitful to draw on a notion that defines self-deception not on the basis of a model of interpersonal deception but rather as the result of a motivated misinterpretation of facts (2004, 373). Self-deception in that case does not amount to knowing and not knowing something at the same time or to holding two contradictory beliefs; instead, it involves forming a false belief under the influence of motivation. Motivated by his craving, someone comes to believe that it is okay to eat this particular piece of chocolate cake. This notion of self-deception does not require that a person be aware at the moment of action of the belief of which he is deceived.

Schälike points out that Alfred Mele is one of the authors who has developed such an alternative notion of self-deception. In a more recent

article, Mele summarizes the core of his view as follows: 'self-deceivers have motivationally biased beliefs' (2009, 261). The idea is that motivation can influence one's belief-formation, for example through misinterpretation (positive or negative), selective focusing, and selective evidence gathering (2009, 261-262). He illustrates how this might work: '…desire can enhance the vividness or salience of data. […] Similarly, desires can influence which hypotheses occur to one and affect the salience of available hypotheses' (2009, 263-264). Mele's view does not come down to believing something merely by willing to believe it. He stresses that his view does not entail anything like intentionally deceiving oneself. For this reason, he calls his view 'deflationary'. The self-deception lies in the fact that a person believes something because he is biased by his motivation.

One may perhaps hesitate to call this non-intentional motivated belief-formation a form of self-deception, for deception seems to imply the intention to deceive. Mele expresses this worry himself: '…someone might claim that if I have unmasked something, it is not self-deception' (2009, 275). He responds that even though his critics do not agree with all of the details of his account, most accept that what he describes is a form of self-deception. For those who are nevertheless not persuaded, however, I propose that we use a different term instead – for example, 'rationalization'. This term is related to self-deception but does not have the associations of intentional deceit and holding contradictory beliefs. Rationalization can refer to cases such as coming up with an excuse to make an exception to a general standard for action[23] or focusing only on the reasons that justify a certain action.

Julius Schälike uses such a notion of non-intentional self-deception to describe the experience of akratic action, but he does not provide the kind of account I am looking for. His article for the most part follows Ursula Wolf's analysis of akratic action in terms of self-deception (1985). She is skeptical about strict akratic action but tries to understand how people can nonetheless think they experience it. According to her, and Schälike follows her in this, self-deception enters the scene twice. First of all, someone comes

23 A person with an akratic character might make so many exceptions to a general standard for action that his behavior no longer qualifies as exceptional. Nonetheless, he may still rationalize his action by perceiving it as an exception.

to have a long-standing false belief about what he values most. For example, a person is mistaken about the hierarchy of his standards for action. This long-standing false belief is motivated by a desire to be the kind of person who subscribes to certain standards for action (1985, 30). Secondly, to justify opting for immediate pleasure in a particular situation, a person becomes convinced, for example, that the current situation is an exception to his standard for action, about which he was self-deceived in the first place (1985, 31). After the action, he realizes that he has rationalized his behavior, but at this point he can declare without cost – that is, without having to confirm it in action – that he sees his standard for action as binding (1985, 32). The crux, according to Wolf and Schälike, is that a person does not grant the standard for action that he violates the status that he says he does. They use the notion of self-deception to describe a case that looks like (but is not) a case of failing to abide by one's better judgment.

However, non-intentional self-deception or rationalization can also help to describe real instances of *non-strict* akratic action, which involve failing to abide by a better judgment that one *sincerely* endorses. It can account for cases in which someone at the relevant moment discards or does not think about the better judgment. Under the influence of competing motivation, a person temporarily focuses on reasons to make an exception or to justify a certain course of action. As a result, for the time being he fails to see that his standard for action commits him to acting in this situation or he does not give his better judgment any thought. Akrasia as a character trait can hence manifest itself in a non-strict way through self-deception (more specifically, through non-intentional self-deception or rationalization).

A character approach thus has a broad scope. It can include as manifestations not only 'classic' strict akratic actions but strict and non-strict diachronic forms as well. The fact that akrasia as a character trait has a wide variety of manifestations also plays a crucial role in the fourth and last advantage of a character approach that I want to point out.

3.4 An agnostic stance on the possibility of strict akratic action

The fourth advantage of a character approach is that it can refrain from taking a stance on the possibility of strict akratic action. As a consequence, it can basically accept all solutions to the logical puzzle. (I address one important exception further on.) This is an advantage, first of all, because it means that discussions on akrasia as a character trait need not lead to the impasse that it seems discussions on the logical puzzle unavoidably face. And secondly, as intriguing as the logical puzzle is, it clouds other issues concerning akrasia that are also worth our attention.

In the previous chapter, I explained that an action approach almost exclusively focuses on the logical puzzle[24] of how strict akratic action is possible. In this form, akratic action is the most puzzling and raises the largest challenge for action theory. I also explained that the three possible strategies for dealing with the logical puzzle each face a difficulty that appears to be insoluble because it is inherent to the strategy itself. Either akrasia has to be given up – at least in its strictest form – or the relation between better judgment and motivation remains unintelligible. This suggests that an action approach cannot move beyond the logical puzzle.

A character approach does not make the logical puzzle go away; nor does it provide a new strategy for tackling it. A character approach can still be confronted with the logical puzzle. In this sense, a character approach encompasses an action approach: it can address the same philosophical challenge. Strict akratic action is one of the ways in which the stable condition of akrasia could manifest itself. The challenge of explaining the possibility of strict cases stays very much the same. A character approach cannot say anything more about this than an action approach can.

The medieval scholastic literature illustrates this. Jörn Müller observes that in ancient and medieval literature, akrasia was regarded as a character trait

24 Recall that the logical puzzle is constituted by the fact that the possibility of acting against one's better judgment is in tension with the action theoretical assumption that if one sincerely judges that it is best to perform a certain action and is free to perform it, then one will also be most strongly motivated to do so and will automatically act in that way.

(2009, 28-29). This observation lies at the heart of this dissertation. He also argues, however, that the medieval scholastic debate on akrasia reached an impasse that, according to him, was similar to that faced by the contemporary debate (2009, 755).[25] Ancient and medieval discussions about the forms that the manifestations of akrasia as a character trait can take went through motions that were similar to those in contemporary discussions on the logical puzzle about strict akratic action,[26] and this reached its height in the scholastic debate (2009, 740). Voluntarists who believed in the autonomous status of the will pointed to strict akratic action in order to argue against the plausibility of intellectualistic positions which ascribed more influence to reason.[27] The fact that akrasia was regarded as a character trait did not prevent the older literature from getting stuck in a discussion about the possibility of strict akratic action.

Nevertheless, a character approach enables us to focus on something other than the logical puzzle, because it can take an agnostic stance towards strict akratic action. Note that such an agonistic stance, if only for the time being, is required to avoid the logical puzzle because granting the possibility of strict cases is what I have dubbed the third strategy of dealing with the puzzle (denying a tight link between better judgment and motivation), and denying its possibility comes down to the first or second strategy (denying all or some forms of strict akratic action).

On a character approach there is, first of all, the alternative of focusing on the stable condition of akrasia as such. One may ask, for example, how this condition can be stable and how it is to be morally evaluated. This by itself is not enough to avoid the logical puzzle, for a character trait reveals itself through manifestations. However, in the previous section I showed that a character approach can incorporate both strict and non-strict manifestations. All manifestations are equally expressive of the overarching

25 Some prominent figures in this scholastic debate are Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus.

26 A. Hügli makes a similar observation (2004, 805 and 807).

27 At the end of the scholastic debate, the interest in akrasia disappeared because, as with the contemporary view of motivational externalism, on the extreme voluntaristic positions that emerged every decision and action was rendered equally mysterious.

character trait of akrasia. As long as the character trait can manifest itself in some way, the precise way in which it manifests itself does not matter. The character trait can include strict akratic action if it is possible. If strict akratic action is impossible, however, the stable condition could still express itself through non-strict akratic action. A character approach is not dependent on whether strict akratic action is possible. A person can be a procrastinator, for example, even if he is never aware that he procrastinates at the very moment at which he does. Secondly, then, a character approach can remain agnostic about the possibility of strict akratic action because it has the option of focusing on non-strict manifestations.

There is of course one possible solution to the logical puzzle that a character approach cannot accept: denying strict akratic action by denying any form of akratic action whatsoever, including all imaginable non-strict forms.[28] It might therefore seem that a character approach cannot avoid the logical puzzle after all because it is not entirely indifferent to the solution. This conclusion does not follow, however. The target of the logical puzzle is strict akratic action. The incompatible assumptions that constitute the logical puzzle do not render non-strict cases suspicious. Not-strict akratic action does not form much of a puzzle, or at least not the same puzzle as strict cases do. If one wants to defend the position that non-strict akratic action cannot occur, one therefore needs to enter a different discussion than the one about the logical puzzle. Non-strict manifestations certainly raise challenges of their own. When is a temporary judgment shift irrational? Which notion of self-deception should we use, or should we rather talk of rationalization? And why might someone not clearly have the relevant better judgment in mind at the moment of action? From an action theoretical perspective,

28 I know of no one who explicitly takes this rigid view. Some authors seem to imply that no form of akratic action is possible because they state that akrasia is impossible in general. However, I suspect that in those cases the real target is again strict akratic action. In Plato's *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates denies akrasia altogether, but he provides an alternative description in terms of overvaluing an object due to its proximity in time. This resembles Ainslie's description of a temporary judgment shift. Both Wolf and Schälike also seem to deny akrasia in general. Their description of how someone can have a false impression of acting against his better judgment can easily exist alongside non-strict forms of akratic action, though.

however, a person's failure to abide by a better judgment of which he is at the moment of action not aware that he endorses it is not all that perplexing. The better judgment fails to be productive because it is not consciously present (in the right way) at the relevant moment. On a character approach, one can therefore refrain from taking a stance on the logical puzzle without necessarily having to give up on non-strict forms of akratic action.

Note that this way of responding to the logical puzzle is not open to an action approach. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, an action approach has the tendency to either dismiss non-strict descriptions or see them as derivative at most (see for example Davidson 1969, 97-98 and Mele 1987, 19). Non-strict descriptions are for the most part presented as substitutes for strict akratic action by authors who apply a skeptical strategy in dealing with the logical puzzle. So non-strict cases play a role in an action approach mainly as artillery to deny the possibility of strict akratic action. This keeps the discussion on the logical puzzle very much at the center of attention, though.

Hence, a character approach can but need not address the logical puzzle. The greatest advantage is that this makes it possible for a character approach to also address the questions and worries that akrasia raises as an everyday problem.

3.5 The situationism challenge

I have discussed several advantages of a character approach to akrasia over an action approach. None of these advantages really matter, however, if it turns out that it is unlikely that character traits exist. Philosophical situationism claims that this is indeed unlikely. Let me therefore consider the 'situationism challenge'.

Building on empirical research, philosophical situationism challenges the existence of broad character traits such as courage and honesty and thereby also seems to pose a challenge to my project on akrasia as a character trait.[29] Much has already been written on situationism, and I do not intend

29 I do not address psychological situationism. For a discussion of the person-

to rehash the entire debate. I shall briefly summarize the situationists' main claims, and then refute the challenge by relying on two counterarguments offered by Tom Bates and Pauline Kleingeld. Not only are their arguments particularly persuasive, but out of all the counterarguments in the debate theirs are also the most significant to my project. I show that their arguments apply to akrasia as a character trait as well. I conclude that the empirical evidence relied on by the situationists does not rule out the existence of a character trait such as akrasia.

3.5.1 Situationism

Situationists – such as John Doris, Gilbert Harman, Peter Vranas and Maria Merritt – consider it unlikely that character and character traits exist, at least in the way these notions are usually understood in ethical theory (virtue ethics in particular) and everyday language. Their view is based on psychological research. According to situationists, empirical evidence shows that situational factors typically better explain human behavior than a person's alleged character does.[30] As Merritt, Doris and Harman put it, '[s]ocial psychologists have *repeatedly* found that the difference between good conduct and bad appears to reside in the situation more than in the person' (2010, 357). For example, one psychological experiment suggests that whether a person helps someone to pick up a dropped pile of papers is better explained by factors that influence mood – such as finding a dime in a phone booth shortly beforehand – than by whether the person possesses a trait such as helpfulness.[31] And there are many more psychological experiments that the situationists cite, the most familiar of which are probably Stanley

situation debate in psychology, see for example William Fleeson et al. (2015).

30 There are many varieties and arguments within the debate on situationism that I do not discuss. For excellent overviews of the debate, see Kristján Kristjánsson (2010, Chapter Six) and, especially, Tom Bates (2016).

31 It is no coincidence that most of the examples that I mention in relation to situationism are about helping behavior, for many of the relevant psychological experiments are about helping others.

Milgram's obedience experiments and a series of experiments on the so-called 'bystander effect'. The striking aspect of situationism is not the idea that situational factors influence behavior as such. Character traits can be expected to be highly sensitive to specific circumstances. For example, helpfulness requires that a person takes into account factors such as whether someone needs help, who needs help the most, and what kind of help is required. The issue is that according to situationists the situational factors that influence behavior are typically factors that are morally insignificant and irrelevant (such as finding a dime) and are often not recognized by people themselves as influencing the way they act.

Situationists primarily argue against the notion of a 'global' or 'robust' character trait. They deny that people's behavior is typically consistent from one trait-relevant situation to another. The claim is based on evidence of people's overt behavior. Situationists do not overlook the fact that a person's inner condition – thoughts and feelings – is a crucial part of a character trait. However, they hold that one would nonetheless expect a character trait to produce *either* consistently morally admirable behavior (such as helping others) *or* consistently morally deplorable behavior (such as not helping others) in trait-relevant situations. As Doris phrases it: '…if a person has a robust trait, they can be confidently expected to display trait-relevant behavior across a wide variety of trait-relevant situations, even where some or all of these situations are not optimally conducive to such behavior' (2002, 18). Empirical evidence shows that people's observable behavior is mostly mixed, however. Take helpfulness again. It turns out that most people help in certain kinds of help-relevant situations and fail to help in other kinds of help-relevant situations, and situationists maintain that this depends on the presence or absence of help-*ir*relevant situational variables such as the weather or the number of other people standing by. They conclude that traits such as helpfulness apparently do not exist (or are very rare at most) and that there is typically no 'cross-situational consistency' in people's behavior. To summarize, situationism is the view that human behavior typically lacks cross-situational consistency and that broad character traits do not exist.

3.5.2 Two counterarguments to situationism

Many objections have been raised against situationism. I limit myself to a brief discussion of two counterarguments by Tom Bates (2016) and Pauline Kleingeld (2015). These counterarguments are particularly persuasive because they battle situationism on its own ground. Furthermore, they are most relevant for my purposes because they focus not on the perfect state of virtue but on other global character traits, most prominently on the morally imperfect state of vice. For this reason, these two arguments are easily transferable to the morally imperfect character trait of akrasia.

Bates and Kleingeld develop separate but complementary arguments against situationism. Both authors choose not to contest the situationists' approach of building on certain empirical evidence,[32] but they nonetheless question whether the empirical data indeed support the basic assumptions of situationism. Furthermore, they both observe that situationists should pay more attention to other global character traits than those that have received most of their attention thus far.

Bates grants the situationists that global virtues seem to be rare, but he claims that, given the empirical evidence, it is plausible that global vices are widespread among the population. He calls this view 'character pessimism' (2016, Chapter Four). The pessimism refers to the evaluative status of the kind of global character traits that are likely to exist. Bates provides alternative trait explanations of the empirical data relied on by situationists in terms of vices, especially in terms of cowardice (including a fear of embarrassment), selfishness, and laziness. If a person is lazy, for example, this can explain why he will opt out of helping someone if he can. Bates argues that this could account for the fact that in the so-called 'Good Samaritan Experiment' most subjects did not help a stranger in need when they were in a hurry and did help when they were not in a hurry. He observes that 'those in a high hurry condition *could* avoid helping, as they were late for an appointment' (2016, 77). The people who were not in a hurry did not have a similar excuse. On

32 Although it would definitely benefit the discussion on the empirical plausibility of global character traits if there were more relevant empirical studies with a longitudinal within-subject design.

top of this, Bates notes that there is no convincing empirical proof against the existence of global vices. He points out that there is even some empirical evidence in support of it. For example, 'the moral hypocrisy literature seems to offer support for my [Bates'] suggestion that people may have robust self-interested motivations which they strive to conceal when in the public eye' (2016, 93). If Bates is correct, empirical data do not rule out the existence of global vices and even suggest that it is plausible that these global character traits are widely possessed.

Kleingeld provides the complementary argument that situationism is based on a fallacy concerning the kind of behavior situationists expect as a result of global character traits.[33] Recall that situationists base their skepticism about global character traits on the claim that if a character trait is consistent across situations, one would expect it to result in observable patterns of behavior that are *either* morally admirable *or* morally deplorable. Kleingeld maintains that this expectation does not stretch to all global character traits: 'Situationists overlook a broad range of possible reasons and global character traits that would lead agents to act *consistently* without their observable behavior being *consistently morally good or bad*' (2015, 347). Kleingeld mentions several vices (or possible vices) as an example, such as cowardice, indolence, a disposition to shift blame to others, and egoism.[34] An egoistic person, for example, is unlikely to help in all help-relevant situations, but he may nevertheless be inclined to help when he knows that other people are watching. Kleingeld concludes that the existence of a global character trait such as egoism is compatible with the kind of behavioral evidence that situationists refer to.

33 Kleingeld also argues that situationism involves a self-contradiction. The situationists recommend certain forms of situation management, but this would precisely require 'a global, robust, and stable disposition to manage one's situations in the morally appropriate way' (2015, 356). In a similar vein, Wouter Sanderse remarks that 'situationism *presupposes* the kind of practical wisdom it rejects' (2012, 100).

34 Kleingeld notes that not everyone will conceive of egoism as a vice (2015, 349).

Hence, even though situationists may be right that global virtues are not widespread among the population, this does not mean that people typically lack global character traits. The existence of especially global vices is compatible with the empirical evidence that the situationists build upon.

3.5.3 Application to akrasia

Robust akrasia has received little attention in the debate on situationism.[35] The counterarguments to situationism that Bates and Kleingeld base on considerations about global vices go for akrasia as a robust character trait as well.

First of all, the expected behavior of a vicious person and a person with akrasia can be very much the same. Aristotle, in any case, holds that the difference between the two lies solely in a person's attitude towards his own behavior and not in the behavior itself. According to him, the difference is that a vicious person does not see that what he is doing is wrong, whereas a person with akrasia disapproves of his own behavior. The akratēs may not like the way he tends to act, but he can act in the same way and on the same motivations as a vicious person. If this is correct, Bates' alternative trait explanations of the experimental data in terms of vices and Kleingeld's remarks on the expected observable behavior of vices such as egoism are transferable to related instances of akrasia as a character trait. Some people with akrasia may be prone to choose the lazy option if they can get away with it or may be prone to consistently act for reasons of self-interest. Hence, akrasia is equally compatible with the empirical literature on which the situationists rely.

Akrasia as a character trait might have more explanatory value than vice particularly in the case of empirical experiments in which there are indicators that test subjects dislike their own behavior. In Milgram's original obedience experiment, for example, under the pressure of an

35 An article by Dylan Murray (2015) forms a notable exception. However, Murray does not consider the option that akrasia is itself a robust character trait. He instead thinks of akrasia as something that can bypass a person's character traits.

authority figure most test subjects administered what they thought were dangerous electrical shocks to a third person. While doing so, many of the subjects 'were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh' (Milgram 1963, 375). It seems that most test subjects disapprove of their own behavior, and, as noted above, on an Aristotelian picture this is exactly what distinguishes akrasia from vice. Trait explanations in terms of robust akrasia may therefore fit some of the empirical data even better than trait explanations in terms of global vice.

Furthermore, and as suggested above, as a character trait akrasia is likely to vary in degree. This is an additional reason to expect the resulting observable behavior to vary.[36] The fact that someone has an akratic character does not mean he lacks control entirely. As I have argued, shortages of self-control are likely only to pertain to certain spheres of a person's life. With regard to a specific sphere, however, akrasia as a character trait may vary as well, namely in the strength it takes for competing motivation to outbalance a better judgment. For example, two people whose akrasia relates to food may differ with regard to how strongly they are tempted by or how easily they are prone to give in to a desire for a piece of healthy-diet-incompatible food. If the two come across a similar range of healthy-diet-incompatible-food-related circumstances, we can expect the one to violate his better judgment about a healthy diet most of the time but the other to do so only some of the time. (Or we can expect the one to eat a whole pie, for example, and the other to only eat a small part of it.) The akratic character of the latter person could still be robust in the sense that it may typically manifest itself in a wide range of situation types in which a certain level of temptation is reached. Because this person's akrasia is not too strong, however, as spectators

36 The character trait I have in mind is notably different from Christian Miller's mixed traits. He understands a mixed trait as a set of interrelated mental state dispositions that are unified only by the sphere to which they pertain and that disposes a person to act morally admirably in one sphere-relevant situation and morally deplorably in another. Miller stresses that 'the "mixed" has to do with the moral evaluation of trait, as it has both morally positive and morally negative aspects' (2015, 169). The way I see it, the moral qualities of an akratēs are consistent in the sense that with regard to a certain sphere the akratēs is steadily and to a specific degree morally praise- or blameworthy. For a critical discussion of Miller's mixed trait model, see Bates (2015).

we see a person who sometimes gives in to healthy-diet-incompatible food and sometimes does not. This kind of behavioral variation is exactly what we find in the experiments that the situationists refer to.

On top of this, there is also empirical evidence that seems compatible with the existence of a stable akratic condition. Walter Mischel has done a follow-up study on people whom he tested at a young age regarding their ability to delay gratification. The study revealed that 'preschool children who delayed gratification longer in the self-imposed delay paradigm [the results of which were published in 1972] were described more than 10 years later by their parents as adolescents who were significantly more competent. Specifically, when these children became adolescents, their parents rated them as more academically and socially competent, verbally fluent, rational, attentive, planful, and able to deal well with frustration and stress' (Yuichi Shoda, Walter Mischel and Philip Peake 1990, 978). Of course, we need to be careful which conclusion we draw. The combination of early self-control and later success in life might be due, for example, to beneficial social circumstances. However, the findings may also suggest that a person's level of self-control is relatively stable over a long period of time, and that this accounts for how well he does in life. Further questions would then include the age at which and the ways in which a person can best acquire a self-controlled character. Secondly, it is common among psychologists to consider procrastination as a trait with explanatory power.[37] Several experiments show that procrastination is significantly correlated with the personality trait of low conscientiousness (the facet of self-discipline in particular) and to a lesser extent with high neuroticism (see Clarry Lay et al. 1998, Wendelien van Eerde 2003, and David Watson 2001). I have argued that procrastination can be considered a possible manifestation of akrasia as a character trait. If this is correct, evidence of trait procrastination is also evidence of trait akrasia. Mischel's follow-up study and the literature on procrastination thus seem compatible with the idea of akrasia as a robust character trait.

37 Psychologists generally have in mind personality traits rather than character traits. However, some psychologists acknowledge that procrastination has moral connotations (see Van Eerde 2003, 1402). Perhaps on their view character traits could be considered a moral subclass of common personality traits.

To conclude, like global vices, akrasia as a robust character trait is compatible with the kind of empirical evidence that situationists refer to. There is even empirical evidence that is consistent with the possibility of people actually possessing akrasia as a character trait. Against situationism, then, the empirical evidence gives us no reason to believe that robust character traits, including akrasia, are unlikely to exist.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that an action approach cannot do justice to akrasia as it is of most concern in everyday life, whereas a character approach can. Akrasia is of the greatest concern and raises the strongest moral criticism when it forms a pattern. A character approach focuses on akrasia in a recurrent form and can also take all of the factors that are relevant to its moral evaluation into account. Furthermore, it acknowledges a wider scope of akrasia than an action approach does. Due to its diachronic nature, akrasia as a character trait can include as manifestations not only strict but also non-strict akratic actions. This fact also enables a character approach to pay attention to issues other than the logical puzzle. On a character approach, it is possible to remain agnostic about the possibility of strict akratic action because akrasia as a character trait can manifest itself in non-strict ways as well.

Furthermore, I have shown that the empirical evidence to which situationism refers does not pose a threat to my project on akrasia as a character trait. I will not engage much further with empirical literature. I am first and foremost interested in the philosophical questions surrounding akrasia as a character trait, and a philosophical analysis of this character trait is lacking in the contemporary literature. I especially wish to address the repetitive nature of akrasia as a character trait, as well as its moral status.

In the remainder of this dissertation, these topics will remain central. In the next two chapters, I discuss Aristotle's views on how akrasia as a character trait can be stable and long-lasting and where he situates akrasia in a moral hierarchy of character traits. In the final chapters, I follow this division. I build on Aristotle's work while addressing further challenges to

the conception of akrasia as a stable character trait and discussing akrasia in relation to moral responsibility.

4. ARISTOTLE ON AKRASIA AS A STABLE AND LONG-LASTING CHARACTER TRAIT

4.1 Introduction

In the next two chapters, I discuss Aristotle's views on akrasia as a character trait (*hexis*). He offers a fruitful and detailed character account of akrasia. Moreover, my discussion of Aristotle's character account provides a fresh perspective on his views on akrasia, for in the literature the focus is usually on what he has to say about akratic action. In Book VII.3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*)[1], he considers what happens at the moment when a person acts contrary to reason. In all of his work, this passage is most explicitly concerned with akratic action, and it has received extensive – almost exclusive – attention in discussions of his account of akrasia.[2] Some authors who address Aristotle's views on acting akratically even neglect to mention the character aspect entirely. Authors who do pay more heed to an element of character in this context mostly turn to Aristotle's ideas on character in general to try to understand his viewpoint, again, on how akratic action is possible (see for example Amélie Rorty (1970), Myles Burnyeat (1980), and Norman Dahl (1984)). I want to emphasize, however, that for Aristotle akrasia is itself a character trait – a fact that has not received sufficient attention in the literature thus far.

1 *NE* VII is identical to Book VI of the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*).

2 The extensive literature on akrasia in Aristotle's work testifies to this focus. See, for example, Gerasimos Santas (1969), Robert Solomon (1971), Alfred Mele (1981), Filip Grgić (2002), and the references in the section on the symptoms of akrasia below.

As far as I am aware, no in-depth examination of Aristotle's character account of akrasia has been published.[3] It is worthwhile to examine it more closely. First of all, while a description of akrasia as a character trait is lacking in the contemporary literature, Aristotle provides a systematic and rich account of this character trait. There is therefore much to learn from examining his character account. Secondly, a focus on the aspect of character in Aristotle's discussion of akrasia sheds new light not only on *NE* VII.3 but on the remainder of his discussion of the topic in *NE* VII.1-10 as well. I argue that the fact that Aristotle regards akrasia primarily as a character trait structures the whole of his discussion of akrasia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

I first show that Aristotle indeed primarily considers akrasia to be a character trait (4.2), for not everyone in the literature is already convinced of this. I go on to explore the specific features he attributes to akrasia as a character trait. Aristotle attributes two main features to character traits in general. He thinks of a character trait as a state (*hexis*) of character.[4] As such, he holds that character traits are stable and long-lasting (*Categories* 8.8b29 and *NE* V.1.1129a13-16) and make someone well- or ill-disposed (*Metaphysics* V.20.1022b10-12 and *NE* II.5.1105b25-26).[5] I then inquire how, on Aristotle's account, these two features apply to the character trait of akrasia in particular. In this chapter, I address the first feature (4.3) and argue that the actions Aristotle refers to in *NE* VII.3 are on his view the temporary and occasional symptoms of an underlying, stable and long-lasting condition.

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3 Jörn Müller (2009) and John Cooper (2009) also point to the significance of Aristotle's characterological conception of akrasia, and I have benefited from their discussions. However, both of them fail to take into consideration all features of Aristotle's character account of akrasia. I build on their observations, discuss them in more detail, and show that the fact that Aristotle regards akrasia as a character trait strongly structures his discussion of the topic.

4 There are, for example, also states of knowledge (*epistēmē*; VI.3.1139b31) and states of technical expertise (*technē;* 1140a10). See also Pierre Rodrigo (2011).

5 For an extensive discussion of the general features of character traits in Aristotle's work, see D.S. Hutchinson (1986). I do not address Aristotle's view on the ontological status of character traits. Carol Gould considers this and concludes that 'Aristotle views a *hexis* as deeply rooted in the human personality and as having a firm metaphysical reality' (1994, 184).

4.2 Akrasia is primarily a character trait

Aristotle's description of akratic action in *NE* VII.3 has received an overwhelming amount of attention.[6] If one pays attention to this passage alone, however, it is easy to get the impression that Aristotle thinks of akrasia as a type of action. Donald Davidson, in any case, believes that according to Aristotle akratic action cannot be habitual (1969, 96-97). And, Martha Nussbaum says in a lexical entry on character that '*[a]krasia*, or weakness, is not strictly parallel to the other three conditions [virtue, vice and *enkrateia* (self-control)], since Aristotle defines it not as a condition of the character, but as a type of behavior' (1991, 133). A closer look at the whole of *NE* VII.1-10 shows, however, that this view is mistaken and that Aristotle also regards akrasia as a state of character.

First, although Aristotle at no point defines the term *akrasia*, he does define a type of person that he calls the *akratēs*. He says that this is someone who is:

> …inclined to depart from reason, contrary to the correct prescription, because of his affective state, who is overcome by that state to the extent of failing to act in accordance with the correct prescription but not to the extent of being the sort of person to be persuaded that one should straightforwardly pursue such pleasures. (VII.8.1151a20-24)[7]

The akratēs characteristically succumbs to affect but (explicitly or implicitly) thinks he should not.[8] His reason and affect are in disharmony, and it is the latter that typically ends up determining how he acts. By contrast, Aristotle

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6 Burnyeat (1980) observes, though, that in *NE* VII.3 Aristotle only describes akratic action but offers no explanation as to how such actions are possible.

7 Quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are from the edition by Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe (2002). Rowe translates akrasia as 'lack of self-control' or 'uncontrolledness' and the akratēs as 'the un-self-controlled'.

8 Aristotle also distinguishes the akratēs from other types of persons in light of the kind of desire he succumbs to and the kind of objects he pursues. I say more about this in Chapter Five.

distinguishes between several other types of people, most notably the virtuous, the vicious, and the *enkratēs* (the self-controlled person). The enkratēs is the type of person whose reason and affect are also in disharmony, but in whose case reason typically wins out. In the case of the virtuous person and the vicious person, reason and affect are in harmony. The vicious person's reason is corrupt, however. Aristotle hence relates akrasia to a specific type of person, the akratēs.

More importantly, Aristotle explicitly identifies akrasia as a character trait several times. He starts his discussion of akrasia in *NE*VII by stating that it (together with vice and beastliness[9]) has to do with character (*peri ta ēthē*; 1.1145a15). At other places he literally calls it a character trait (*hexis*).[10] After discussing the main features of enkrateia and akrasia, for example, he says: 'It is evident, then, from these considerations that one of these character traits[11] [*hexis*] is good, the other bad' (VII.8.1151a28-29). And in the concluding remark to his discussion of akrasia, he says: 'We have said, then, what self-control is, what un-self-controlledness is, what resistance is, and what softness is, and how these character traits [*hexeis*] stand in relation to each other' (10.1152a34-35).[12] He further describes akrasia as a character trait at 1.1145b1-2, 7.1150a12-16, and 10.1152a26-28.

At one point Aristotle seems to contradict the notion that akrasia is a character trait; there is a passage in which he says that akrasia and vice are 'wholly different in kind [*genos*]' (8.1150b35-36), and the kind to which vice belongs is that of character traits (II.5.1106a9-12). Elsewhere, however,

9 I prefer Cooper's (2009) translation of *thēriotēs* as 'beastliness' to Rowe's 'brutishness'. It avoids the unwanted sexual connotation of the alternative 'bestiality' but maintains the connection to animals that is present in the Greek term.

10 It is clear from the context that Aristotle is talking about *hexis ēthikē*, as he does in relation to virtue (2.1139a34; cf. Cooper 2009, 10-11).

11 I prefer 'character traits' to Rowe's 'dispositions'. The latter is often used in a wider sense than character traits. I have adapted Rowe's translation on this point throughout.

12 Akrasia and enkrateia on the one hand and resistance (or endurance) and softness on the other hand are very similar groups of character traits. The difference, according to Aristotle, is that the first group is related to pleasure, whereas the latter is related to pain (7.1150a15).

he makes the exact opposite remark. He says: 'we should not regard either of these two things [enkrateia and akrasia] as having to do with the same character traits [*hexeis*] as excellence and badness, or as being of a different kind [*genos*]' (VII.1.1145b1-2). Here Aristotle indicates that akrasia and vice are both character traits but stresses that they are *different* character traits. It is plausible that the first passage is meant to make the same point: akrasia and vice are both character traits, but they are of a different kind in the sense that they are *not identical* character traits.

A further factor that might seem to complicate matters is Aristotle's occasional use of the verb *akrateuomai* ('to act akratically'[13]) to address akratic action. However, Aristotle only discusses acting akratically as a separate topic in *NE* VII.3, the section in which he speaks about the extent to which a person can have knowledge of his reason's prescription while acting contrary to it. What is more, except for one occasion,[14] he only uses the verb in the context of the 'puzzle' (*aporia*) that is central to *NE* VII.3 (see 2.1145b21, 1145b30, 3.1147b18, 1146b25, 1147a24, and 1147b1). For the most part, and this includes *NE* VII.3, Aristotle talks about the akratēs and akrasia (which, as I have just shown, he identifies as a character trait). The character notion of akrasia is thus predominant in his work. This suggests that he is mainly interested in akratic action insofar as it is the type of action that the akratēs typically performs.

Further support for the claim that Aristotle regards akrasia primarily as a character trait is the fact that in what is by far the largest part of his discussion on the topic in *NE*, he compares it to all sorts of other character traits. He compares akrasia to the general character traits of virtue and vice (with regard to their moral status, curability, and the doctrine of the mean), to specific virtues and vices (moderation, self-indulgence, practical wisdom,

13 In their dictionary of ancient Greek, Liddell and Scott translate the verb as 'to be incontinent'. A translation indicating action seems more correct, however, for Aristotle uses the verb in the context of what happens while the akratēs acts.

14 On the one occasion that Aristotle uses a form of the verb *akrateuomai* outside of the context of the puzzle that is central to *NE* VII.3, it is in a passage in which he distinguishes between impulsiveness and weakness in relation to akrasia (10.1152a28). I return to this in the section on the symptoms of akrasia.

and justice), and to character traits that resemble it closely but that, according to him, are to be distinguished from akrasia as such, for example akrasia with regard to *thumos*, akrasia with regard to things such as honor and money, and softness (again with regard to their moral status).

Hence, there is ample evidence that Aristotle regards akrasia first and foremost as a character trait. This is not to deny that the topic in *NE* VII.3 is acting akratically. However, his discussion of akrasia as a whole is directed towards the character of the akratēs.

4.3 Stable and long-lasting

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how on Aristotle's account the feature of being stable and long-lasting takes shape in akrasia as a character trait. Let me start by designating two aspects of the feature of being stable and long-lasting that Aristotle ascribes to character traits in general, and thereby by extension to akrasia.

In the *Categories*, Aristotle illustrates what it means for a state to be stable and long-lasting. He gives the example of paleness (which is a state, but not a character trait). He says that we only call someone pale if his paleness is a stable and long-lasting condition and not if it is the result of a sudden fright (8.9b19-32). Someone can be pale, or someone can turn pale. Similarly, in the context of states of character, we only attribute a character trait to someone if his condition is stable and long-lasting. With regard to virtue, for example, Aristotle says that an action can only be virtuous if its base is 'firm and unchanging' (*NE* II.4.1105a33).[15] Likewise, then, it seems that according to Aristotle an action can only be truly akratic if it is expressive of the stable and long-lasting condition of the akratēs. I am not sure whether this means that he rules out the possibility of single akratic actions. Alfred Mele points out that it is inherent to the way we talk about a character trait that there are exceptions. A character trait typically comes in degrees. It follows that

15 For Aristotle, the possession of a character trait does not depend on actually performing the actions that the character trait disposes one to perform. For example, he points out that when someone is asleep his character remains intact (I.5.1096a1).

we also attribute the character trait of self-control to those who are less than perfectly self-controlled (1987, 4). Implicit in Mele's argument is the assumption that someone who is not perfectly self-controlled sometimes fails to abide by his better judgment. Since this person is self-controlled, the akratic action cannot be the result of a stable akratic condition. So, despite the fact that Aristotle regards akrasia as a character trait, he could in principle grant that single akratic actions may occur as well. In any case, the fact that as a state akrasia is stable and long-lasting implies that the akratic actions of the akratēs typically flow from a firm and unchanging base.

Aristotle furthermore holds that character traits are stable and long-lasting in a particular way, in the sense that they reliably produce a specific kind of action (and not its contrary). When he discusses the character trait of justice in *NE*, he notes that 'with a capacity [*dunamis*] or expertise [*epistēmē*], the same one seems to relate to both members of a pair of contraries, whereas a character trait [*hexis*] […] does not relate to contraries in this way; so e.g. health does not lead to our doing both healthy and unhealthy things, but only healthy ones' (V.1.1129a13-16). The *capacity* to be persuasive, for example, can be used both to guide others and to mislead them. A *hexis* such as health, however, can only make a person healthy, not unhealthy. Equally, a *hexis* such as a character trait can only result in a specific kind of action. Justice produces only just acts, injustice only unjust ones. Each is a character trait on its own. This does not mean that character traits always have to manifest themselves in the exact same manner[16], or that a just person can never do unjust things. However, when a person's character trait of justice determines his action, which it likely does with regularity, the action can only be a just one. The fact that as a character trait akrasia is stable and long-lasting thus implies that this condition only produces akratic actions (and not, for example, sometimes also vicious, self-controlled or virtuous actions).

In addition to these two more general characteristics, Aristotle maintains that there is something particular about the stable and long-lasting nature of the character trait of akrasia as well, at least in comparison to his notion of vice. To my knowledge, John Cooper is the only one to describe

16 Aristotle says, for example, that what it is virtuous to do can differ according to the situation (e.g. II.9.1109a24-31).

Aristotle's view on this feature in relation to akrasia (and simultaneously to enkrateia). He writes: 'They [the akratēs and the enkratēs] are people with more or less permanently, or at least well-settled, divided minds and feelings about the matters that they are self-controlled or uncontrolled about' (2009, 13). What needs further explanation is what precisely it is about the character trait of akrasia that is 'well-settled' or 'stable and long-lasting', according to Aristotle. Unfortunately, Cooper does not elaborate on this. I believe the key to understanding Aristotle's view on the stable and long-lasting nature of akrasia is an analogy that he draws between akrasia and epilepsy.

4.3.1 Stable and long-lasting in a non-continuous way: the analogy with epilepsy

Aristotle relates akrasia to epilepsy in a passage in which he compares akrasia to vice. He states that the bad aspect of vice is constantly present while the bad aspect of akrasia is not. On his view, 'badness of character resembles diseases like dropsy [edema] or consumption [tuberculosis], while lack of self-control resembles the sort involving seizures [*epileptikois*]; for the one is a continuous, the other a non-continuous way of being as one shouldn't be' (*NE* VII.8.1150b33-35). Vice, according to Aristotle, is like a disease such as edema or tuberculosis, the symptoms of which are always on show (swelling, coughing). The vicious person's 'badness' (that is, his corrupt reason) reveals itself constantly. Akrasia is like a disease such as epilepsy, the symptoms of which only show now and then (seizures). Of course, other dispositions and character traits manifest themselves in symptoms as well, some of which are also only temporarily present. However, the epilepsy analogy shows that, in contrast to vice, the character trait of akrasia on Aristotle's view manifests itself only occasionally, and, more importantly, that the distinctive characteristic of akrasia is therefore not visible all the time. The 'bad' nature of the akratēs – that is, the part of his condition that is not in line with reason – only reveals itself at intervals.

The analogy with epilepsy is worth developing further.[17] An epileptic has a medical condition all the time, but it does not show all the time. It becomes visible through symptoms, which only occur temporarily and occasionally. Furthermore, there is (at least sometimes) a trigger, such as lack of sleep or stress. Importantly, the symptomatic seizures are only triggered when a person has the epileptic condition. Akrasia is similar. It is a stable and long-lasting condition which does not reveal itself all the time, but which shows itself through symptoms that occur only temporarily and occasionally. Furthermore, there is a trigger (according to Aristotle, always).

This interpretation of the analogy between akrasia and epilepsy fits a distinction that Aristotle draws between two different states that the akratēs may occupy. While setting up the puzzle about the akratēs' knowledge, he says: 'it is evident that the person acting uncontrolledly doesn't think of doing it, before he gets into the affective state in question' (2.1145b30-32). Aristotle distinguishes, then, between the affective state of the akratēs and the state he is in when he is not affected. Of the affective state Aristotle says that this is the state that the akratēs is in when he acts akratically. Furthermore, he talks about this state as something that a person 'gets into' before once again being resolved (3.1147b6-9). The affective state is thus only temporary. Concerning the intermittent 'unaffected state', Aristotle says that when the akratēs is not affected, he does not think of acting 'uncontrolledly' – that is, he does not consider acting against reason. This does not mean, though, that when the akratēs *is* affected, he approves of acting contrary to reason. The point is rather that the akratēs feels pulled to act contrary to reason only at those moments when he is in the affective state.

In analogy with epilepsy, then, the affected state that Aristotle mentions can be called the symptom (or manifestation) of akrasia. This state can be considered stable insofar as it is reliably produced, but it is certainly not long-lasting. Only in this temporary affective state is there an affect that opposes reason, and thus a pull to act contrary to reason. This means that on Aristotle's view the characteristic disharmony between reason and affect (where affect typically prevails) is only an aspect of the temporary and

17 Of course, the analogy has its limitations as well. For one thing, epilepsy does not capture the fact that akrasia is intentional.

occasional symptoms of akrasia as a character trait – that is, of akratic actions.

Moreover, just like epileptic seizures can be triggered, something triggers the symptoms of akrasia.[18] Certain objects of desire cause an affect and the corresponding disharmony to arise. In general, Aristotle distinguishes between three different kinds of desire: rational desire (*boulēsis*), *thumos*[19], and appetite (*epithumia*) (e.g. III.2.1111b11 and *EE* II.7.1223a26-27).[20] In the case of the virtuous person, all three of these are in accordance with reason (*NE* VI.2.1139a22-26, II.9.1109a27-28 and III.12.1119b15-18). In the case of akrasia, appetite is typically not. Aristotle says that appetite draws the akratēs to act contrary to reason (VII.3.1147b3). To be precise, Aristotle holds that objects of *bodily* appetite do this – that is, objects of food or drink, or the opportunity for sex (4.1147b26-28; cf. III.10.1118a24-32). In Chapter Five, I discuss why Aristotle restricts the sphere of akrasia to food, drink and sex. For now, note that according to him the affected state of the akratēs is triggered by objects of bodily appetite.

Finally, in analogy with epilepsy, there is an underlying condition that ensures that the symptoms are reliably triggered, but of which the 'bad' nature is not constantly on display. The akratēs' behavioral history may testify to his character, but we cannot tell that he is akratic merely on the basis of, for example, talking to him about his general views on good moral conduct, which are very much like the views of the enkratēs and the virtuous person. In between akratic actions, what is on show is the akratēs' general knowledge that pertains to action (in other words, the universal premise that he acknowledges), which is in accordance with reason. What is *not* on display at those moments is his inclination to act contrary to reason. Nevertheless,

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18 Julia Annas pointed out to me that in Aristotle's time, an epileptic attack was often thought to strike without warning. Even nowadays, what triggers a specific epileptic attack remains a mystery in many cases. It is often not so hard to see, however, what initiated an akratic action.

19 The Greek term *thumos* has been translated into English as, for example, 'temper', 'spiritedness', or 'anger'. I prefer to leave the Greek term untranslated as it has a wider scope than the English terms suggest. I say more about *thumos* in Chapter Five.

20 For excellent discussions of this distinction, see Klaus Corcilius (2008a) and Giles Pearson (2012).

this person is always disposed to act akratically. Even when the akratēs is not affected, he remains the type of person who is disposed to fail to act in line with reason's prescriptions.

On Aristotle's view, then, what makes the character trait of akrasia stable and long-lasting is an underlying condition that disposes the akratēs to think, feel, and act a certain way. According to him, the disharmony or conflicted nature that is typical of akrasia is itself not permanent, but is only present with the temporary and occasional symptoms (or manifestations) of the character trait. Let me take a closer look at what, according to Aristotle, the symptoms of akrasia (that is, akratic actions) look like and what is distinctive about the underlying condition of akrasia in comparison to that of other character traits.

4.3.2 The symptoms of akrasia: akratic actions

Aristotle's description of the symptoms of akrasia can be found in the much-discussed passage on akratic action in *NE* VII.3 (1146b31-1147b3). In this passage, he addresses the question of what form the disharmony between reason and affect can take at the moment at which the akratēs fails to abide by reason's prescription. Much has already been written on Aristotle's view on akratic action. Since I am more interested in the character framework of which akratic action forms a part than in akratic action as such, it is not my aim to argue decisively for a specific interpretation of *NE* VII.3. I leave many of the details and nuances of the different interpretations aside and limit myself to an impression of Aristotle's view on akratic action. I add to the literature the observation that Aristotle's discussion of akratic action in *NE* VII.3 fulfills a specific role within his character account of akrasia, namely that of addressing the shape of the symptoms of the character trait.

There has been wide discussion of how many forms of akratic action Aristotle identifies.[21] Following Norman Dahl (1984), we may distinguish between 'traditional' and 'alternative' interpretations.[22] Roughly, traditional interpretations of *NE* VII.3 hold that Aristotle presents one form of akratic action, in which the akratēs' does not have (full) knowledge of reason's prescription during action[23], whereas alternative interpretations hold that he discusses a second form of akratic action, in which the akratēs does have knowledge of reason's prescription while acting contrary to it.[24] To connect it to contemporary terminology, the question comes down to whether Aristotle allows only for a non-strict form of akratic action (traditional interpretations) or whether he makes room for strict akratic action as well (alternative interpretations). In applying this contemporary terminology here, it is important to bear in mind that Aristotle describes the characteristic conflict of akrasia in terms of a disharmony between reason and affect, whereas in the contemporary literature it is more commonly described as a conflict between a person's better judgment and competing motivation. Having said that, I present both the non-strict and the strict form of akratic action that Aristotle arguably presents in *NE* VII.3.

The two forms of akratic action that Aristotle arguably identifies have sometimes been linked to the distinction between impulsiveness (*propeteia*) and weakness (*astheneia*) that he introduces in relation to akrasia (see for example Norman Dahl (1984, 210), Theodore Scaltsas (1986) and

21 Perhaps Aristotle's text is not entirely clear as a result of the fact that the *Nicomachean Ethics* was written as a series of lecture notes and not as a book to be read by others. On top of this, there are some translation difficulties which make it hard to come up with a final interpretation.

22 See also, for example, Sarah Broadie's commentary on *NE* VII.3 in Broadie and Rowe's edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. She talks about interpretation A and interpretation B (2002, 388-394).

23 See, for example, Ronald Milo (1966), Richard Robinson (1977), Terence Irwin (1989), Justin Gosling (1993), Jens Timmermann (2000), Martin Pickavé and Jennifer Whiting (2008), and Jozef Müller (2015).

24 See, for example, Norman Dahl (1984), Theodore Scaltsas (1986), Klaus Corcilius (2008b), and David Charles (2009).

David Charles (2009)).[25] Interestingly, there is a textual link between the passage on akratic action in *NE* VII.3 and one of the passages in which Aristotle mentions this distinction between impulsiveness and weakness. Recall my earlier remark that, except for one occasion, Aristotle uses all of the forms of the verb *akrateuomai* in the context of the puzzle that is central to *NE* VII.3. The exception is a passage in which he says that '[t]he type of uncontrolledness displayed by [akrateuetai] the bilious [or impulsive] sort is more easily curable[26] than the one belonging to people who deliberate but do not stick to it [that is, weakness]' (10.1152a28-29).[27] I am not entirely sure whether Aristotle perceives impulsiveness and weakness as two (slightly) different character traits, or whether he instead uses these terms to denote two possible expressions of the character trait of akrasia. In any case, Aristotle presumably talks about acting akratically in this context because it is in the heat of action that the difference between impulsiveness and weakness is visible. He says that in the case of impulsiveness, the akratēs fails to deliberate, whereas in the case of weakness the akratēs deliberates but fails to stick to the outcome of deliberation (7.1150b19-28). It therefore appears that impulsiveness can be associated with a non-strict form of akratic action, and weakness with a strict form.

At any rate, there is wide agreement in the literature that Aristotle describes a non-strict form of akratic action (especially at 3.1147a1-10).[28]

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25 When commentators working from a traditional interpretation address this distinction, they try to integrate it within the frame of a non-strict form of akratic action. See for example Martin Pickavé and Jennifer Whiting (2008, 359-365) and Jozef Müller (2015, 13).

26 I do not go into the issue of curability here, but Aristotle certainly does not think that it is easy to change one's character. The fact that the intended audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is people who are already well on their way to virtue goes to show that Aristotle believes that it is very hard to become virtuous for those who did not have a good upbringing from the start. In the quotation, the aspect of curability instead seems to indicate that impulsiveness is less remote from virtue than weakness. This is relevant to the moral evaluation of akrasia that I discuss in the next chapter.

27 Literally translated, Aristotle says something like 'the sort of akrasia which the impulsive do akratically' [tōn akrasiōn, hēn hoi melagcholikoi akrateuontai].

28 Corcilius (2008b) is an exception. He maintains that although Aristotle indeed

As noted above, this form of akratic action is sometimes identified with the description of impulsiveness, where Aristotle says that the akratēs is typically led by affect because he failed to deliberate (7.1150b22). Aristotle presents this non-strict form of akratic action in terms of his model of action, which is commonly referred to as the practical syllogism. In its simplest form, this model consists of a universal premise (e.g. sweet food should not be tasted), a particular premise (e.g. this piece of food is sweet), and a conclusion drawn on the basis of these premises (e.g. this piece of food should not be tasted). The issue at stake is whether a person can act against the conclusion of the practical syllogism while having knowledge of it.[29] In the case of the non-strict form of akratic action that Aristotle distinguishes, the akratēs is not aware of the conclusion while acting contrary to it. The essence of this form of akratic action is that the akratēs 'has both premisses but is using only the universal one, not the particular one; for it is particulars that are acted on' (3.1147a1-2). He adds a couple of lines later: 'whether *this* is such-and-such – this is what the agent either does not 'have', or does not activate' (1147a7). Most commentators conclude that according to Aristotle the akratēs in this case fails to reach the conclusion because something has gone amiss with the particular premise.[30] The akratēs may be aware of the relevant universal knowledge. In fact, he might also very well know that 'this food is sweet' (cf. Paula Gottlieb 2008, 208 and David Charles 2009, 48). He is likely to have an appetite for this piece of food *because* he knows that it is sweet. However, he fails to combine the particular premise with the relevant universal one. He could have reached the conclusion had he deliberated, as he might have done beforehand or on similar occasions. At the moment of action,

describes this form of action, he only considers the form of strict akratic action that he describes in the next paragraph as an actual instance of acting akratically.

29 For an overview of the different interpretations of Aristotle's practical syllogism, see Christof Rapp and Philipp Brüllmann (2008). The main question is whether, according to Aristotle, the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action (and what this means), or whether there can possibly be a gap between conclusion and action. In contemporary terms, one could say that the discussion is about whether or not Aristotle endorses a strong form of motivational internalism.

30 Martin Pickavé and Jennifer Whiting (2008) uniquely argue that the problem instead lies with the universal premise.

however, the akratēs has not actually formed the conclusion. In the case of this non-strict form of akratic action described by Aristotle, the disharmony between reason and appetite therefore takes an indirect form.[31]

If Aristotle introduces a second and strict form of akratic action, he seems to be doing so especially in *NE* VII.3.1147a10-24, that is, in the lines immediately following the passage that I referred to in the former paragraph.[32] According to most alternative interpretations, in this passage Aristotle discusses a form of akratic action in which the disharmony between reason and affect is more direct. As noted above, this form of akratic action is sometimes identified with Aristotle's description of weakness, where he says that the akratēs typically fails to stick to the results of the deliberation because of his affective condition (7.1150b20-21; cf. 10.1152a27-30). The core of this form of akratic action is that the akratēs 'both has knowledge in a way and does not have it' (3.1147a12). Aristotle indicates what he means by this with the help of several analogous examples. He first mentions those who are 'asleep, raving or drunk' (1147a14). The conditions of the people who are in these states are similar to that of the akratēs because they are all under the influence of *bodily* affections. Aristotle goes on to further typify these examples and introduces two new ones along the way. He says: 'those in the affected states mentioned, too, can recite demonstrative proofs and Empedoclean verses[33], and if those who have learned something for the first time can string the words together, they don't yet know what they have learned – because they have to assimilate it, and that requires time. So we must suppose that those who act uncontrolledly, too, are talking like actors on stage' (1147a20-24). It seems, then, that Aristotle here has a form of akratic action in mind in which the akratēs has knowledge (in a certain sense) of the relevant conclusion while acting contrary to it, for like

31 Note that because of the focus on strict akratic action, in the contemporary literature this 'impulsive' form would usually not be considered a genuine instance of akratic action (cf. Annemarie Kalis 2011, 22).

32 On traditional interpretations, this passage is considered an addition to Aristotle's former line of thought.

33 Presumably, this excludes those who are asleep, for they cannot testify to their knowledge, unless we count dreaming about it or mumbling in one's sleep.

drunks, raving people, actors, and beginning students, the akratēs can 'recite' the knowledge and can 'string the words together'. On this basis, authors with an alternative interpretation argue that Aristotle identifies a second and strict form of akratic action in which the disharmony between reason and appetite takes the shape of a direct confrontation.

Regardless of which interpretation of *NE* VII.3 is correct, however, note that in the passage about actors and beginning students Aristotle remarks that even when the akratēs can recite his knowledge of reason's prescription while acting akratically, this knowledge is not assimilated. In *NE* VII.3, Aristotle does not illuminate what he means by this. He only says that assimilation requires time. This indicates that the lack of assimilation has to do with the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of akrasia.

4.3.3 The underlying, stable and long-lasting condition

Aristotle does not discuss the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of akrasia as a separate topic. It is not surprising that the symptoms receive special attention because it is through the symptoms that the underlying condition shows. Further details about this part of his character account of akrasia need to be derived from his general theory of character and virtue, in a similar vein to how authors such as Rorty, Burnyeat and Dahl have appealed to Aristotle's general theory of virtue and character development to understand how his account can make room for the possibility of akratic action.

Fortunately, Aristotle provides a clue as to what is distinctive about the underlying condition of akrasia when he compares the akratēs to the person who is practically wise and who hence possesses the virtue of practical wisdom, *phronēsis*.[34] He says that 'one is not wise merely by virtue of having knowledge, but also by being the sort of person to act on one's knowledge' (*NE* VII.10.1152a8-9). He adds that the knowledge of the wise person differs

34 Dahl (1984) also stresses that it is fruitful to compare Aristotle's account of akrasia to his account of practical wisdom. I have benefited greatly from his discussion.

from the mere cleverness [*deinotēs*] that the akratēs might possess 'in terms of the decisions [*proairesis*] made' (1152a14; cf. VI.2.1139a22). Some aspect of Aristotle's notion of decision, then, must be what makes the difference on his view between the stable and long-lasting conditions of the akratēs and the practically wise person.

In his discussion of practical wisdom, Aristotle specifies what he understands by 'decision'. He says: '…decision [*proairesis*] is a desire informed by deliberation [*orexis bouleutikē*], in consequence what issues from reason must be true and the desire must be correct for the decision to be a good one, and reason must assert and desire pursue the same things' (1139a23-26). Aristotle thus attributes not only an intellectual or 'reason' aspect to practical wisdom but a motivational or 'desire' aspect as well.

Aristotle holds that for a decision to be a good one, reason's prescriptions must be true. In comparison to practical wisdom, the condition of akrasia may therefore be initially characterized by some sort of lasting cognitive deficit. As Burnyeat (1980) has shown, the virtuous person has a better grasp of what virtue is than the akratēs, in the sense that he not only knows which actions are virtuous ('the *that*') but also why ('the *because*'). More specifically, it has been suggested that the akratēs 'is deficient in his appreciation of the reasons for assenting to the conclusion [of the practical syllogism]' such as 'considerations of health and happiness' (Mele 1981, 151-152), or that the akratēs' belief about happiness has been partially false all along in that he 'will be wrong about the occasions on which it is rational for him to follow his conception of his good' (Irwin 1989, 71). Despite these suggestions, though, I wonder whether the distinctive aspect of the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of akrasia can be captured in terms of a permanent cognitive shortcoming (cf. Ty Landrum 2008). For, in comparison to the vicious person, Aristotle stresses that the akratēs' reason – more particularly, the fundamental starting point of reason – is healthy (*NE* VII.8.1151a5-16). Perhaps Aristotle merely wants to indicate that the akratēs' reason is in a better state than that of the vicious person (cf. Pavlos Kontos 2014, 231). Then again, he also points out that the akratēs knows what the virtuous thing to do is and is already persuaded that he should do it (see, for example, *NE* VII.2.1146b2-3 and 8.1150b29-32). Moreover, the *enkratēs* has not yet acquired full knowledge of 'the *because*' of virtue

either, and this type of person does manage to abide by reason's prescriptions despite the disharmony between reason and affect. The akratēs' reason is not fully mature, but it is questionable whether this is the main demarcating aspect of the underlying condition of akrasia.

However, Aristotle holds that a good decision not only requires that reason's prescriptions be true, but also that desire be correct – that is, that desire pursues the same thing as reason. Another option, then, is that the underlying condition of akrasia (also) involves a lasting affective or motivational deficit.[35] When Aristotle talks about correct desire in the context of decision, he is referring to rational desire (*orexis bouleutikē*, or *boulēsis*). Rational desire is the kind of desire that has the good as its object (III.4.1113a15). This includes reason's prescriptions about what it is good to do. Rational desire therefore naturally sides with reason. It is not the same kind of desire that draws the akratēs to act contrary to reason. That is appetite, which is the kind of desire that has pleasure as its object (12.1119b5-7). Hence, it appears that something is at fault with the way in which the akratēs' rational desire has been cultivated. This is not to claim that the akratēs lacks rational desire altogether, for Aristotle says that this type of person acts contrary to decision (VII.8.1151a5-8) and contrary to rational desire (*EE* II.7.1223b8-9). This is only possible if rational desire is present to some extent. Rather, the akratēs' rational desire is *not sufficiently strong* to outweigh competing appetite when it is present. Aristotle remarks that appetite need not be particularly strong for this to happen[36] (although presumably it sometimes can be strong as well): '…the un-self-controlled type resembles those who become drunk quickly, after little wine, and after less than most people' (*NE* VII.8.1151a3-5; cf. 7.1150a10-14). Hence, on Aristotle's account, the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition

35 For authors who maintain that akrasia mainly involves a motivational error, see for example Dahl (1984, Chapter Eleven), Corcilius (2008b, 153-154), and Paula Gottlieb (2008, 207). Kontos argues that, according to Aristotle, in non-virtuous states intellectual and motivational shortcomings typically go together: '…good ethical states go hand in hand with good intellectual ones, whereas non-good ethical states go hand in hand with non-good intellectual ones' (2014, 220).

36 I thank Jörn Müller for stressing this point to me.

of the akratēs can be distinguished from the conditions of other types of persons perhaps by some kind of cognitive deficit but in any case also by a motivational deficit in the form of a permanently overly weak rational desire.[37]

4.3.4 Lack of assimilation, and impulsiveness and weakness

I suggested above that Aristotle's view on the underlying condition of akrasia can illuminate what he means by the 'lack of assimilation' of the akratēs' knowledge. If this is correct, the lack of assimilation in any case consists of a permanently overly weak rational desire. Aristotle only explicitly speaks of 'lack of assimilation' in the context of what I have presented as the second and strict form of akratic action – that is, the symptom of akrasia that can be associated with weakness. However, his remark on the lack of assimilation is also relevant in relation to the non-strict form of akratic action – that is, the symptom that can be associated with impulsiveness. The motivational shortcoming is a mark of the underlying condition of akrasia in general. The lack of assimilation thus bears on all of the symptoms of the character trait, be it in the form of a non-strict akratic action or in the form of a strict akratic action.

Aristotle implies that there is a connection between the degree of lack of assimilation and the kinds of symptoms that can flow from the akratēs' character. In relation to weakness, Aristotle says that people with an akratic character 'are overcome by a lesser state of affection, and they do not act without prior deliberation as the other sort [the ones whose akratic character is portrayed by impulsiveness] do' (*NE* VII.8.1151a2-3). The quotation points out that, in comparison to impulsiveness, with weakness it is a less strong appetite that outbalances rational desire. This implies that,

37 Aristotle holds that desires can be cultivated through practice and habituation (II.1.1103a38-b2 and VII.8.1151a18-19). For more on his view on character development, see for example Myles Burnyeat (1980), Nancy Sherman (1989), Howard Curzer (2002), Kristján Kristjánsson (2007), and Wouter Sanderse (2015).

according to Aristotle, in the case of weakness the akratēs' rational desire is also less strong than in the case of impulsiveness.

More precisely, the relation between the strength of the akratēs' rational desire and the symptoms of akrasia seems to be as follows. If rational desire is weak, it only takes very weak appetite to defeat reason. Aristotle pairs this up with the (strict) type of acting akratically that involves prior deliberation – that is, the symptom that has to do with *weakness*. If rational desire is somewhat stronger, however, it also requires a somewhat stronger appetite to defeat reason. Aristotle connects this to the (non-strict) type of acting akratically that does not involve prior deliberation, which is the symptom that is related to impulsiveness.

This does not necessarily mean that, according to Aristotle, weakness can only manifest itself through the strict type of acting akratically. It is typical of weakness that an akratēs gives in to a very weak appetite, even when he deliberates and is aware of reason's prescription at the moment of action. If this akratēs' appetite is somewhat stronger, however, it is plausible that he would also not be able to resist the pull of affect. Presumably, then, in the case of weakness an akratic character can manifest itself in both the strict and the non-strict type of acting akratically that Aristotle distinguishes.

Aristotle's account thus postulates a connection between the extent to which an akratēs has cultivated rational desire – which is under any circumstances typically not very strong – and the kind of symptoms through which his character may manifest itself. If the underlying condition of akrasia involves a very weak rational desire, it can produce both strict and non-strict akratic actions. If the rational desire is somewhat stronger, the character trait of akrasia can manifest itself only in non-strict akratic actions.

4.4 Final remarks

Due to the tendency to focus on akratic action and *NE* VII.3 in Aristotle's work, the fact that Aristotle regards akrasia primarily as a character trait has not received sufficient attention. Regarding akrasia as a character trait means, first of all, that akrasia has the feature of being stable and long-lasting. The analogy with epilepsy reveals how this feature applies to akrasia in particular.

It turns out that, according to Aristotle, akrasia is stable and long-lasting in a non-continuous way. The disharmony between reason and affect that is so characteristic of akrasia is only an aspect of the temporary and occasional symptoms (that is, akratic actions) of the character trait. These symptoms are distinct from the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of akrasia.

I have presented an interpretation of Aristotle's account in which he draws a distinction between two symptoms of akrasia (which can be associated with his notions of impulsiveness and weakness), and in which it is distinctive of the underlying condition of akrasia that it in any case involves a motivational deficit in the form of a permanently overly weak rational desire. Furthermore, I argued that Aristotle assumes that there is a connection between how strongly (or weakly) the akratēs' rational desire is cultivated and the kind of symptoms that can flow from his character.[38]

Aristotle provides a systematic and detailed framework for a conception of akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait. This framework can also be relevant and fruitful for developing a contemporary character account of akrasia. In Chapter Six, for example, I argue in connection with the contemporary literature on character development that the analogy that Aristotle draws between akrasia and epilepsy helps us to understand how akrasia can *remain* a stable and long-lasting character trait, despite the fact that the akratēs is displeased with his behavior. In this chapter, I have addressed Aristotle's views on the stable and long-lasting nature of the akratēs' character. In the next chapter, I turn to Aristotle's views on the moral status of akrasia as a character trait.

38 Only empirical research can really establish whether there is such a connection. I find intriguing, though, the suggestion that there might be a relation between how strongly someone is disposed to fail to abide by his better judgment and the form that the manifestations of his akratic character can take.

5. ARISTOTLE ON THE MORAL STATUS OF AKRASIA AS A CHARACTER TRAIT

5.1 Making someone well- or ill-disposed

The focus on akratic action and on *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) VII.3 in Aristotle's work has obscured not only the fact that Aristotle regards akrasia primarily as a character trait (and thus as a stable and long-lasting state) but also the fact that consequently, according to Aristotle, akrasia is a moral notion.[1] Aristotle holds that character traits make someone well- or ill-disposed (*Metaphysics* V.20.1022b10-12 and *NE* II.5.1105b25-26). Given that a character trait is stable and long-lasting in the sense that in trait-relevant circumstances it reliably results in a specific kind of action, a character trait makes a person *either* well- *or* ill-disposed, not well-disposed now and then ill-disposed later.[2] In this chapter, I inquire how the feature of making someone ill-disposed (not well-disposed) applies to the character trait of akrasia in particular.

I argue that Aristotle's perspective on the moral status of akrasia as a character trait can be found in *NE* VII.4-10. This part of Aristotle's discussion of akrasia has not received as much attention as it deserves. David Charles explains why this may be the case: 'Many believe that Aristotle's subsequent discussion has nothing of philosophical significance to add to his brilliant, if elusive, remarks in *NE* 7.1-3' (2011, 187). Despite Charles' refreshing commentary on *NE* VII.4-10, however, he himself examines these chapters only insofar as they illuminate some of Aristotle's remarks on akratic

1 'Moral' for Aristotle indicates where a person stands on the scale from virtue to vice.

2 This is not to deny that character traits can allow for degrees, however.

action in *NE* VII.3. To this end, he especially addresses Aristotle's distinction between impulsiveness and weakness. However, I argue that *NE* VII.4-10 is of particular interest to Aristotle's character approach to akrasia because he here establishes just how ill-disposed an akratic character makes a person. He discusses several character traits and draws up a moral hierarchy based on how well- or ill-disposed these character traits make someone. Vice is the worst, followed by akrasia.

To my knowledge, thus far only Jörn Müller has explicitly acknowledged that, according to Aristotle, akrasia is a character trait and thereby a moral notion (or, in Müller's words, a morally qualified disposition; 2009, 110).[3] Unfortunately, he does not consider Aristotle's grounds for evaluating the character trait of akrasia in a particular way, though. I first briefly sketch the general criterion on the basis of which Aristotle evaluates character traits (5.2). I then discuss the specific factors that he deems relevant for evaluating akrasia (5.3). These come to the fore in his discussion of various character traits in *NE* VII.4-10. Since there is no integrated analysis of this part of Aristotle's account of akrasia in the contemporary literature as of yet, and certainly not from the perspective of the framework of character, I present a quite detailed discussion of Aristotle's account of the moral status of akrasia as a character trait. It will become clear that Aristotle has a nuanced and rich perspective on what should be taken into account in morally evaluating akrasia as a character trait.

3 Several other authors have commented on parts of *NE* VII.4-10 as well or have addressed the question why Aristotle limits the sphere of akrasia to food, drink and sex. See especially, although not exclusively, the collection of close reading articles on *NE* VII in Natali 2009a. However, these authors do not give an account of akrasia in *NE* VII.1-10 as a whole. One could say that they examine parts of the picture but do not take the entire image into account.

5.2 Rationality as a general criterion for evaluating character

It requires a more general evaluative criterion to establish just how well- or ill-disposed specific character traits make someone. Pierre Rodrigo points out that in Aristotle's work, different criteria apply to different kinds of states (2011, 7). States of knowledge, for example, are evaluated in terms of truth value; states of character, in terms of how rational they dispose someone to be.

Aristotle emphasizes that it is the possession of reason that sets humans apart from other animals. Rational capacity is the exclusive and distinctive property of human nature.[4] He holds that the moral evaluation of character is thus based on how well a person does with regard to this aspect of human nature (*NE* I.7.1098a1-16). This must not be understood in an overly intellectualistic way. As already discussed in Chapter Four, on Aristotle's view affect, and especially rational desire, form a crucial part of practical wisdom (4.1098b3-6 and III.9.1117a21-23). For a character trait to make someone well-disposed, his reason must be healthy, but the non-rational part of his soul must also participate in and be obedient to reason (I.13.1102b14-32 and VI.13.1144b28, cf. *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) II.1.1219b27-34).

A character trait only makes a person well-disposed, however, if reason's prescriptions are correct, because if they are not, being disposed to obey them will not make a person good. For prescriptions to be correct, they must prescribe what it is best for you to do considering that, as a human being, you are a rational being (*NE* II.1.1103a23-26 and 6.1106a21-24). It is important to note this because most contemporary authors who are concerned with akrasia find it most crucial that a person does not do what he himself happens to think is best, regardless of the content of the judgment. In other words, they are startled by the fact that someone disobeys his *own* reason's prescriptions, and they want to know how this is possible. As I explained above, Aristotle finds this puzzling as well, but he is primarily

4 Or at least of the nature of free men. Aristotle holds that women and natural slaves do not fully possess reason. William Fortenbaugh (2006) discusses in detail Aristotle's views on women and natural slaves.

interested in people who fail to abide by reason's prescriptions when those prescriptions are the correct ones (VII.3.1146b24-31 and 9.1151a29-b5).

On Aristotle's view, then, the criterion that forms the basis for the evaluation of character is formed by how well a person does considering that, as a human being, he is first and foremost a *rational* being. One character trait violates the criterion of rationality more than another and thus makes a person more ill-disposed than another, and conversely for character traits that follow the criterion of rationality and make a person well-disposed. On Aristotle's account, as a character trait akrasia is hence subject to moral evaluation in light of the criterion of rationality.

5.3 Factors relevant to the moral evaluation of akrasia as a character trait

Aristotle holds that akrasia makes a person very ill-disposed (*NE* I.1145a15-17) and that it violates the criterion of rationality in several ways. The specific factors that Aristotle considers relevant for evaluating akrasia can be derived from his discussion of akrasia in comparison to various other character traits in *NE* VII.4-10.

Since on Aristotle's account it is an inherent feature of character traits that they are subject to moral evaluation, the factors that demarcate one character trait from another are also morally relevant. For example, the vicious person and the akratēs both act wrongly. The difference is that the first does not disapprove of his actions, whereas the latter does. This factor also makes vice worse than akrasia (7.1150a26-31, 8.1150b29-32, and 1151a5-16). Aristotle does not claim that people's actual characters necessarily neatly follow the distinctions he draws between different character traits. He says in relation to akrasia and enkrateia, for example, that 'the disposition belonging to most people is in between these' (7.1150a16).[5] This suggests that a person can be akratic with regard to certain spheres and more self-controlled with regard to others. He therefore seems to grant that in real life the psychological

5 For discussions of what Aristotle means by 'most people' or 'the many', see Jan Garrett (1993) and Jörn Müller (2014).

boundaries between character traits might be more blurry. Within Aristotle's survey of character traits, however, demarcating factors and evaluative factors coincide.

In the hierarchy of character traits that Aristotle draws up, akrasia comes second. He distinguishes between (starting with the worst): vice, akrasia as such (weakness and impulsiveness), softness (that is, failing to abide by reason due to a desire to avoid pain), akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor, akrasia with regard to *thumos*, and the positive character traits of endurance (that is, abiding by reason despite an inherently painful experience or frustration), enkrateia, and virtue (and possibly also superhuman excellence). I prefer to leave the Greek term *thumos* untranslated because it has a wider scope than common English translations such as 'anger', 'temper', and 'spiritedness' suggest. In addition to the character traits listed above, Aristotle also identifies the negative character traits of beastliness and beastly akrasia, but he does not make clear precisely where in the hierarchy they are to be placed. In fact, they may not fall within the scope of the hierarchy at all, for it is questionable whether the beastly person and the beastly akratēs are sufficiently rational to be susceptible to moral evaluation. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the negative character traits, since a comparison to these helps to cast light on the moral evaluation of the character of the akratēs. The following scheme provides an overview of Aristotle's hierarchy of all of the character traits that make someone ill-disposed, along with their distinctive features[6]:

6 Carlo Natali presents a similar scheme in an appendix to his article on akrasia, beastliness and akrasia with regard to *thumos* (2009b, 129). Unfortunately, Natali does not expand on all of the details of the scheme in his article, nor does he discuss Aristotle's grounds for drawing up the hierarchy as he does.

Aristotle's hierarchy of character traits that make someone ill-disposed[7]

Character trait (from least bad to worst)		**Structure**			**Kind of affect**	**Examples of objects**	
Akrasia with regard to *thumos*		Being disposed to fail to abide by reason by succumbing to affect without thinking one should			*Thumos*		Retaliation, setting relations right
Akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor					Appetite	Exclusively human to desire	Money, honor, profit, winning
Softness (*malakia*)			Avoiding pain			Not exclusively human to desire	Food, drink, sex (Or possibly hunger, thirst, lust)
Akrasia	Impulsiveness		Seeking pleasure	No direct confrontation with reason possible			Food, drink, sex
	Weakness			Direct confrontation with reason possible			
Vice, in the form of self-indulgence		Being disposed to obey one's judgment, but judging incorrectly					

7 I left Aristotle's notions of beastliness and beastly akrasia out of the scheme. Aristotle is not clear about the position these states take up in the hierarchy. Due to an absence of reason, they might not fall within the scope of the moral hierarchy at all. Also, the parts of the scheme about which Aristotle does not make any explicit remarks are left blank.

On Aristotle's view, the specific place of akrasia in this moral hierarchy (that is, the moral status of the akratēs) depends on:

1. whether the akratēs is disposed such that he can give in to affect when there is a direct confrontation between reason and affect or whether he can only do so when there is an indirect confrontation between reason and affect: distinction between weakness and impulsiveness (*NE* VII.7, 8 and 10);
2. the fact that the akratēs' reason is healthy (and not corrupt or absent): distinction between akrasia, vice and beastliness (*NE* VII.5, 6 and 7);
3. the nature of the kind of objects the akratēs has an appetite for (food, drink and sex are not desirable exclusively for human beings): distinction between akrasia, akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor, and beastly akrasia (*NE* VII.4 and 5);
4. the fact that the akratēs desires these objects because of the *pleasure* they promise to bring (in which case reason is defeated more radically or actively by affect than when these objects are desired for the sake of avoiding *pain*): distinction between akrasia and softness (*NE* VII.7);
5. the kind of desire involved (*thumos* is closer to reason than appetite): distinction between akrasia as such and akrasia with regard to *thumos* (*NE* VII.6).

Together these factors demarcate the character trait of akrasia and show why, according to Aristotle, it makes a person very ill-disposed. I address each of these factors in more detail below.

5.3.1 Direct or indirect confrontation between reason and affect

A first factor that Aristotle considers relevant for morally evaluating akrasia is centered on whether or not the akratēs is disposed such that he can give

in to affect when there is a direct confrontation between reason and affect (that is, when the akratēs has knowledge of reason's prescriptions at the moment of action). He mentions this aspect in his remarks on impulsiveness and weakness.[8] I addressed this distinction in Chapter Four, in my discussion of Aristotle's account of the symptoms of akrasia and how they relate to the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of the akratēs, in particular the acquired level of rational desire. Here, I want to point out in addition that, according to Aristotle, weakness is worse than impulsiveness.

Recall that it is a distinctive feature of impulsiveness that the akratēs gives in to affect without prior deliberation, whereas in the case of weakness the akratēs can also fail to stick to reason's prescription even when he deliberates. Aristotle says that 'the sort inclined to depart from reason are better than those who are in possession of the prescription but do not stick to it; for the latter are overcome by a lesser state of affection [*pathos*], and they do not act without prior deliberation [*logos*] as the other sort do' (*NE* VII.8.1151a1-3). Aristotle thus holds that weakness makes an akratēs more ill-disposed than impulsiveness.

One may wonder why it is not the other way around – that is, why Aristotle does not consider impulsiveness worse than weakness. After all, in the case of weakness the akratēs seems to make better use of his reasoning capacities, for even though he does not follow reason's prescription he does manage to complete the process of deliberation at the relevant moment.

To see what Aristotle has in mind, let me recall the main aspects of what I established earlier about his views on impulsiveness and weakness. On his account, whether or not an akratēs can give in to affect in direct confrontation with reason has everything to do with how strongly rational desire has been cultivated and the strength of competing appetites at the moment of action. If rational desire is permanently very weak, as is the case for an akratēs whose character can be described in terms of *weakness*, it only takes a very weak appetite to defeat reason. Aristotle holds that in such a case an akratēs typically gives in to very weak appetites, even when he deliberates and is aware of reason's prescription at the moment of action.

8 Aristotle does not mention whether the distinction between impulsiveness and weakness also applies to the qualified forms of akrasia that he distinguishes.

If his appetite is somewhat stronger, however, it is plausible that he is also not be able to resist the pull of affect. On the other hand, if an akratēs has acquired the level of rational desire associated with *impulsiveness*, he only goes against reason in the face of a somewhat stronger competing appetite.[9] Presumably, if this person experiences only very weak appetite, he does manage to deliberate and act in accordance with reason's prescriptions. This means that in the case of impulsiveness, akrasia can only manifest itself in an indirect confrontation between reason and affect (or a non-strict form of acting akratically), whereas in the case of weakness akrasia can manifest itself both in an indirect and a direct confrontation between reason and affect (or a strict form of acting akratically).

On Aristotle's account, then, impulsiveness and weakness violate the criterion of rationality in similar ways, but weakness does so more strongly. First of all, in the case of weakness reason's prescription can be defied by appetite in a direct clash and in the face of only very weak appetite. And, secondly, in the case of weakness the akratēs' rational desire is cultivated less strongly than in the case of impulsiveness. Both with respect to the symptoms that the character trait of akrasia can produce and with regard to the level of rational desire that marks the akratēs' underlying, stable and long-lasting condition, weakness is thus worse than impulsiveness.

5.3.2 Healthy, corrupt or absent reason

A second factor that Aristotle takes into account in demarcating and evaluating character traits is whether someone's reason is healthy, corrupt, or not developed fully enough for him to be susceptible to moral evaluation at all. Besides akrasia, the character traits that are relevant here are vice and beastliness.

9 This is likely also why Aristotle says that impulsiveness is less hard to cure than weakness (10.1152a28-29). Improving one's character is not easy, but Aristotle seems to hold that the further one's character is removed from virtue, the harder it is to make progress. I say more on character development in Chapter Six.

Consider Aristotle's remarks in *NE* VII on akrasia in comparison to vice. Aristotle holds that vice makes a person more ill-disposed than akrasia does, for the vicious person acts badly more easily than the akratēs (7.1150a26-31). On Aristotle's notion of vice, the vicious person's reason and affect are aligned. In the case of the akratēs, they are not. Nevertheless, akrasia is less bad than vice because the vicious person's reason is corrupted, whereas the akratēs' reason is healthy. The vicious person abides by what he himself (subjectively) thinks he should do, which is informed by what he desires right now. His reason's prescriptions do not reflect what it is *objectively* best to do (8.1151a5-16). The vicious person shows no regret, for he does not disapprove of his own action and he has no desire to act in line with what it is objectively best to do (Aristotle adds that this also makes the vicious person less easy to cure than the akratēs; 1150b29-32). According to Aristotle, despite the fact that the akratēs acts badly, this type of person knows what it is objectively good to do (1151a5-16). That is, his reason's prescriptions are correct. Moreover, the akratēs regrets his action and is thus at least to some extent motivated to change his behavior (1150b30-31). The vicious person violates the criterion of rationality more than the akratēs does because his reason is corrupted. The fact that the akratēs' reason is healthy (that is, he knows what it would be good to do) is, as it turns out, the only positive aspect of akrasia. It is because the akratēs' reason is healthy that akrasia does not belong entirely at the bottom of Aristotle's hierarchy of character traits.

Next to reason's being healthy or corrupt, it is important for the moral evaluation of character that reason is not absent. Aristotle distinguishes the character trait of 'beastliness' (*thēriotēs*).[10] Beastliness involves an appetite for things that are unnatural for human beings to desire, ranging from nail biting to eating human fetuses and other forms of cannibalism (5.1148b20-31). More importantly in this context, Aristotle holds that a person with this character trait both acts badly and lacks reason.

10 Aristotle sometimes uses the term 'beastliness' to refer to a character trait of its own and other times more generally to include both beastliness and morbidity (*nosēmatōdēs*). He holds that beastliness in the strict sense is due to a natural lack of quality, morbidity to disease, or habit (4.1148a35 and 5.1149a9-13).

Aristotle mentions beastliness as one of the character traits that need to be avoided (1.1145a17). Its positive opposite is superhuman excellence (*theia aretē*). Of superhuman excellence Aristotle says that it is to be honored even more than virtue (1145a29). In general, the hierarchy of positive character traits is mirrored in the hierarchy of negative ones. Therefore, one would expect Aristotle to hold that beastliness is even worse than vice. He does not draw this conclusion, however. He maintains that beastliness is certainly more frightening than vice (after all, it can dispose someone to want to consume human flesh), but at the same time he holds that in terms of *moral* evaluation beastliness is less bad than vice. He states that in the case of the beastly person, 'the better part has not been corrupted, as it has been in the human case [that is, vice], but is simply not present' (6.1150a2-3). As noted above, what is corrupted in the case of vice is reason. The vicious person's reason prescribes incorrectly. So if the beastly person lacks reason altogether, this implies that he has no (or an insufficient) rational capacity to deliberate and form prescriptions of reason. Pavlos Kontos concludes as well that on Aristotle's account 'beastliness does not involve the grasp of false practical principles but rather *a total lack of access to practical principles*' (2014, 225). Presumably, the actions of the beastly person are, like those of animals, directly based on affect. Both the beastly person and the vicious person are not doing well, then, but Aristotle holds that beastliness is morally speaking less bad than vice because reason is absent, and therefore there are no prescriptions that could be obeyed in the first place.

It therefore appears that on Aristotle's view beastliness does not so much violate the criterion of rationality as fall outside its scope. However, he also explicitly calls beastliness a character trait (*hexis*) (*NE* VII.1.1145a25 and 5.1148b20), which suggests that it makes a person ill-disposed. It is not entirely clear whether Aristotle holds that beastliness is susceptible to moral evaluation. Perhaps, since the beastly person is a human being, reason is present just enough for beastliness to be considered a character trait. Or perhaps Aristotle simply calls beastliness a character trait because it disposes a person to think, feel, and act in a certain way just as firmly as full-blown character traits do. Another option would be that Aristotle considers beastliness a *natural* character trait. In his discussion of virtue, Aristotle distinguishes between ethical character traits (*hexeis ēthikai*) and

natural ones (*phusikai hexeis* or *phusikai dunamai*). Aristotle says that natural character may dispose a person to act like a virtuous person[11], but that without intelligence (*nous*) this is not virtue as such (VI.13.1144b3-10). It is plausible that something similar goes for beastliness: beastliness disposes a person to act *badly*, but with reason being absent it seems to be a natural character trait rather than an ethical character trait such as virtue, vice, and akrasia.

Aristotle does not directly compare beastliness to akrasia, but it is clear that, according to him, just like the vicious person, the akratēs possesses reason fully enough to be susceptible to moral evaluation. The vicious person violates the criterion of rationality more than the akratēs does, however. Both types of people are disposed to act badly, but the vicious person's take on how he should behave is bad as well, whereas in the case of the akratēs reason's prescriptions are correct.

5.3.3 The nature of the kinds of objects desired

Thirdly, Aristotle distinguishes and evaluates akrasia by means of the nature of the kinds of objects desired. This factor reveals why Aristotle restricts akrasia to the sphere (or domain) of food, drink and sex.[12] He does not deny that people can lack control over all sorts of things. He just holds that the nature of the kinds of objects that a person is disposed to lack control over matters for moral evaluation. This becomes apparent in Aristotle's discussion of akrasia as such, akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor, and beastly akrasia.

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11 In an article on Aristotle's view on natural character, Mariska Leunissen explains that he holds that who we are and how we behave is influenced not only by how well we are educated and habituated but also by the material nature of our body (such as organs and blood) and changeable factors in our environment (2012, 509).

12 Note that akrasia is qua sphere like the particular virtue of moderation and the particular vice of self-indulgence. Vice, as well as virtue, is a genus term (*NE* VI.13.1145a1, VII.3.1146b19-20 and 4.1148b12-13). Vice makes a person ill-disposed in general. Akrasia as such makes a person ill-disposed *towards certain things*.

Perhaps Aristotle restricts akrasia to the sphere of food, drink, and sex simply because this was the primary meaning of the term in his time. As Hendrik Lorenz and Jörn Müller point out, Xenophon and Isocrates both mean pretty much the same thing by 'akrasia' as Aristotle does (2009, 72-73 and 2009, 111). However, if we assume that the audience at the time found this use of the term natural or even obvious, then Aristotle must have had an additional reason to draw attention to the specific sphere of akrasia.

Aristotle's main ground for restricting akrasia to the sphere of food, drink, and sex instead seems to be the fact that, according to him, the nature of the desired objects is relevant to the moral evaluation of a character trait. Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of objects to which a person might give in: '…some appetites and pleasures have objects that are generically fine and good (since some pleasant things are by nature desirable) while the objects of others are the contrary, with those of others in between' (*NE* VII.4.1148a22-24).[13] All of the objects that Aristotle refers to in this quotation are objects of appetite. Since the general object of appetite is pleasure, he is talking about objects that are desired *as* pleasurable (see III.1.1111a32-33 and 12.1119b5; cf. Pearson 2012, Chapter Four). Aristotle thus holds that of the possible objects of appetite, some are natural for human beings to desire (these objects are fine and good[14]), some are contrary to this and thus unnatural for human beings to desire, and some are somewhere in between.

By the objects of appetite that are natural for human beings to desire, Aristotle means things such as money, profit, winning and honor (*NE* VII.4.1148a26 and 1148b2-4). When talking about akrasia in relation to these objects, he adds a qualification such as 'akrasia with regard to honor' (1148b7-14). He holds that these qualified forms of akrasia make a person

13 Following Hendrik Lorenz (2009), I base myself on the distinction that Aristotle makes in the second part of *NE* VII.4 (from 1148a22 onwards). Aristotle presents two versions of the same argument and Lorenz argues convincingly that the second version was meant to replace the first one, not to supervene it (2009, 90-99).

14 Note that this does not mean that the objects are desired *as* fine and good, but only that they are themselves fine and good. Again, appetite is a desire for objects insofar as they are pleasurable.

less ill-disposed than akrasia as such (*akrasia haplōs*; 1148b5-7). By the objects of pleasure that are unnatural for human beings to desire Aristotle means things such as eating human meat (cannibalism), eating fetuses, chewing nails, and eating charcoal (5.1148b21-31). These are the objects involved in beastly akrasia (and beastliness). The objects of akrasia as such, then, are those objects of appetite that Aristotle calls the 'in between ones'. It follows that, according to Aristotle, it is neither natural nor unnatural for humans to have an appetite for food, drink, and sex.

But why would food, drink and sex not be natural to desire? After all, the virtuous person pursues them as well (albeit in moderation) (III.12.1119b16-17). Moreover, Aristotle argues that the akratēs acts voluntarily *because* appetite (which must then be appetite in the sphere of food, drink or sex) is a natural thing for a human being to have (1.1111b2-4 and *EE* II.8.1224b27-31). Furthermore, it would be strange if the pursuit of these objects were not considered natural for human beings, for food and drink are indispensable to individual survival, and sex is indispensable to the survival of the species (cf. *NE* VII.4.1147b26-29). The pursuit of food, drink and sex, then, is in a way natural for human beings after all. Aristotle calls such objects of appetite 'in between ones' because they are not *exclusively* desirable for human beings (cf. Sarah Broadie 1991, 268-269). It is also natural for non-rational animals to have an appetite for these things (*NE* III.10.1118a24-26 and 1118b1-4). Appetite is a kind of desire that we *in general* share with non-rational animals (2.1111b14), but we do not share every *particular* kind of appetite with them. The distinctive element of human nature, the possession of reason, bears on having appetite. First of all, it means that appetite should also obey reason's prescriptions. Secondly, it expands the range of objects that can be experienced as pleasurable. To have an appetite for things such as money and honor requires the possession of reason. These objects contribute to leading a life that is fit for a rational being. As Hendrik Lorenz points out with regard to money (wealth), '… wealth and wealth acquisition are in their own right fine and worthwhile things. After all, they are rational and practically intelligent ways of ensuring that a given household is supplied on an ongoing basis with the various goods that its members need for civilized human living' (2009, 85-86). In the case of akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor, these

objects are desired and pursued in excess (that is, not in line with what reason prescribes). However, acting contrary to reason due to an excessive appetite for 'in between objects' is a greater violation of the criterion of rationality, because these objects are desirable not specifically for rational beings. This leads Aristotle to conclude that akrasia with regard to food, drink, and sex makes a person more ill-disposed than akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor (*NE* VII.4.1148b5-7). This difference in moral evaluation is also why Aristotle restricts akrasia as such to the sphere of food, drink, and sex.

On top of this, Aristotle excludes from the sphere of akrasia as such objects that are unnatural for human beings to desire, given that they are rational beings (these objects are not necessarily desirable for non-rational animals either, though). As mentioned above, he has in mind having an appetite for things such as eating human meat, eating fetuses, chewing nails, and eating charcoal. Aristotle bundles these objects together because they do not *contribute* to leading a good and rational life, nor are they necessary for survival. What troubles a person in this context is not so much excessive appetite as having an appetite for such objects in the first place. Aristotle calls lack of control with regard to objects that are unnatural for human beings to desire 'beastly akrasia' (*akrasia thēriōdēs*) (5.1149a19).

Aristotle does not clarify what 'beastly' refers to in relation to akrasia. It could just point to the fact that a person has an appetite for certain kinds of objects that are not by nature desirable for human beings. Or it could also, as in the case of beastliness, denote an absence of reason (cf. Thorp 2003, 679). Aristotle merely says of beastly akrasia that it is a form of akrasia by resemblance only (*NE* VII.5.1149a3) and that it involves an appetite that is unnatural for human beings, and which they may sometimes overcome (1149a12-16). Aristotle does not specify whether the beastly akratēs knows that it would be best not to pursue the objects for which he has an appetite, or whether there is instead some other ground to believe that the beastly akratēs could in principle overcome his appetite. Perhaps the beastly akratēs has access to well-developed social conventions that could help him to resist unnatural appetites.[15] In any case, it is not clear where Aristotle places

15 This would fit Aristotle's remark that a person with beastliness – who Aristotle

beastly akrasia in the hierarchy of character traits. As with beastliness, reason in the case of beastly akrasia might not be sufficiently developed for it to fall within the scope of the moral hierarchy at all. However, if beastly akrasia *is* susceptible to moral evaluation, Aristotle provides no clue as to where it stands in relation to the other character traits.[16]

What has become evident, though, is that Aristotle restricts akrasia to the sphere of food, drink and sex. He does so mainly because, although it is not unnatural for human beings to desire these objects, they are not exclusively desirable for rational beings either. This is one of the ways in which akrasia violates the criterion of rationality and makes a person very ill-disposed.

5.3.4 Seeking pleasure or avoiding pain

Aristotle evaluates the akratēs not only in light of the nature of the kind of objects this type of person desires but also in view of whether the akratēs desires these objects in relation to pleasure or pain. He says that enkrateia and akrasia, on the one hand, are concerned with objects in the sphere of food, drink and sex because of the pleasure these objects promise to bring. Endurance (or resistance; *karteria*) and softness (*malakia*)[17], on the other hand, are concerned with objects in the same sphere but because of a desire to avoid pain (*NE* VII.7.1150a10-15).[18]

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does not seem to expect to be capable of overcoming appetite – can be found mostly in non-Greek (that is, underdeveloped) societies (1.1145a31 and 5.1149a11).

16 I would have liked to say more about this, but Aristotle does not provide enough clues on beastly akrasia to develop a plausible argument about where this state would fit in his hierarchy of character traits.

17 Aristotle also mentions weakness for comfort (*truphē*) which is a form of softness (*NE* VII.7.1150b3) and a kind of softness that more closely resembles vice, more specifically self-indulgence (1150b17-18).

18 Aristotle does not mention whether this distinction between pleasure and pain is also relevant to the qualified forms of akrasia.

Aristotle holds that enkrateia is more praiseworthy than endurance, and, mirroring this, that akrasia is worse than softness. He explicitly addresses only the moral status of enkrateia and endurance, and he says that the former is more praiseworthy than the latter because 'resisting is a matter of withstanding, whereas self-control is a matter of overcoming, and withstanding is different from overcoming as not being defeated is different from winning' (1150a34-b2).

The interpretation of this passage (and consequently also of what endurance and softness precisely entail), according to Aristotle, depends on whether endurance and softness are, like enkrateia and akrasia, concerned with objects of food, drink and sex or whether they are connected to related objects that have to do with, for example, hunger, thirst and lust. I present two different interpretations of Aristotle's view on the moral status of akrasia in comparison to softness, which depend on the different options for the kind of objects that softness may be concerned with.

A first possible interpretation of this passage is provided by Carol Gould (1994). She suggests that the pain in the case of endurance is caused by the frustration of not fulfilling an appetite for food, drink or sex. She thus holds that the objects of endurance and softness are precisely the same as those of enkrateia and akrasia. On her reading, the difference between the enkratēs and the resistant is that the former completely conquers the pull of appetite before the act, whereas the latter experiences this pull for the entire duration of the act (1994, 177-179). The enkratēs on this view is more praiseworthy than the resistant because he suppresses appetite as soon as it appears. He thereby obeys reason more perfectly than the resistant person does. Gould does not address how this reading bears on akrasia and softness. It implies that the akratēs gives in to affect as soon as it arises, whereas the soft person does not manage to withstand lingering pain. On Gould's interpretation, then, akrasia makes a person more ill-disposed than softness does because reason is more radically defeated by appetite.

A second possible interpretation is that, according to Aristotle, softness is not about avoiding the frustration of an unfulfilled appetite for food, drink or sex, but rather comes down to having a desire to get rid of inherently painful experiences such as hunger, thirst and perhaps lust. In a passage on moderation and self-indulgence – the virtue and vice with

the same sphere as akrasia as such – he mentions that hunger and thirst, as well as heat and cold, are examples of objects of pain that belong to the same sphere as the objects of food, drink and sex (*NE* VII.4.1148a5-10). In a close-reading article of *NE* VII.7, Chris Bobonich considers, among other things, the relevance of pleasure and pain in demarcating enkreteia and akrasia from endurance and softness. He observes that if endurance and softness are directly concerned with the pains of hunger, thirst and so on, it makes sense that Aristotle considers enkrateia and akrasia as respectively better and worse than these character traits, on the grounds that 'there does […] seem to be a certain kind of passivity in being motivationally responsive to pain' (2009, 153).[19]

It is worth developing Bobonich's suggestion about passivity further, for a distinction between activity and passivity matches nicely the difference between the 'pleasure-cases' and the 'pain-cases'. It can make sense of the analogy that Aristotle draws in the above passage between overcoming/withstanding and winning/not being defeated. Not being defeated is like defending yourself by staying put. This is passive in comparison to winning a battle by attacking the enemy. On this reading, the enkratēs abides by the criterion of rationality more strongly than the resistant person does, because in his case appetite is defeated more thoroughly. The enkratēs actively attacks and gets rid of the appetite for food, drink or sex when it arises, whereas the resistant endures hunger and thirst for as long as it lasts. Conversely, the akratēs is actively attracted by the objects of food, drink and sex in trait-relevant situations, whereas softness comes down to avoiding hunger and thirst. Furthermore, the terminology of activity and passivity also fits the analogous examples that Aristotle mentions to illustrate what softness is. He talks about a person who drags his cloak on the ground to avoid the 'pain' of lifting it and about 'the devotee of amusement', where 'amusement' is 'slackening, since it is a kind of resting' (*NE* VII.7.1150b3-5 and 1150b17-19). These examples show people who behave passively and avoid the pains

19 Bobonich also remarks that Aristotle could have in mind in this context the idea that 'it may be very hard to perceive something as painful without also seeing it as bad, even if its badness is outweighed' (2009, 153; cf. *NE* VII.13.1153b1-5). I find no link to this idea in Aristotle's discussion of akrasia, though.

of physical or mental exercise. On this interpretation, the akratēs violates the criterion of rationality more than the soft person does because he is actively attracted by the pleasure promised by the desired objects.

The different interpretations of Aristotle's passage on enkrateia and endurance, and its implications for the distinction between akrasia and softness, do not conflict and could, I think, exist very well alongside one another. It is clear in any case that according to Aristotle akrasia makes a person more ill-disposed than softness does. Giving in to appetite because of the pleasure the desired objects promise to bring violates the criterion of rationality more than giving in to appetite for the sake of avoiding pain, for in the former case reason is defeated more radically by affect, or in an active rather than a passive way.

5.3.5 The kind of desire involved: appetite or thumos

A final factor that Aristotle brings up in relation to the moral evaluation of akrasia is the kind of desire that is involved. Recall that Aristotle distinguishes between three different kinds of desires: appetite (*epithumia*), *thumos*, and rational desire (*boulēsis*). As noted above, I prefer to leave *thumos* untranslated because common English translations such as 'anger', 'temper', and 'spiritedness' do not quite capture the scope of the Greek term. The kind of desire that is central in akrasia as such is appetite, but Aristotle also distinguishes akrasia with regard to *thumos* as a separate character trait.[20]

20 Note that akrasia with regard to rational desire would be impossible on Aristotle's view. Rational desire is by definition in line with reason. Aristotle does mention the example of Neoptolemus, who is persuaded by Odysseus to lie to Philoctetes but who, when the moment comes, tells the truth, not because he changed his mind but due to a 'fine' desire (*NE* VII.9.1151b19-21). Aristotle can only mean a rational desire by this. He maintains that the example about Neoptolemus does not display a good form of akrasia, however. Presumably, Neoptolemus' character is so well-developed that even in the absence of a correct prescription (which, considering Odysseus' incredible talent for persuasion, we might want to excuse him for), the non-rational part of his soul makes him disposed in such a way as to ensure correct behavior. Neoptolemus' case also does not seem to be an example of the contemporary notion of 'inverse akrasia', for at least in the way Aristotle presents it,

He states that this form is less bad than 'the form relating to appetites (*epithumia*)' (*NE* VII.6.1149a24-25; cf. 1149b2-b4, and 1149b24-25). He thus maintains that akrasia with regard to *thumos* is less bad than akrasia as such, and therefore also less bad than all other negative character traits in which appetite plays a pivotal role.

It has been suggested that by 'akrasia with regard to *thumos*' Aristotle does not introduce a new notion but is in fact referring to the same character trait that he addresses as 'akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor'. David Charles writes, for example, that '[i]t is tempting to think that the other cases of *akrasia* which Aristotle mentions (*akrasia* through desire for honour, victory, money, love of one's parents: 1148a29ff) follow the pattern of *akrasia* through anger [*thumos*]' (2011, 197, n.19). The objects that Aristotle mentions in connection to both notions indeed overlap. Furthermore, he says that akrasia with regard to *thumos* is linked to the kinds of objects that are naturally desirable for human beings (*NE* VII.6.1149b7-8), which include, as discussed above, things such as money and honor. Nevertheless, I am hesitant to conclude that Aristotle uses the two notions to refer to the same character trait, for appetite and *thumos* seem to be concerned with the same objects *in essentially different ways*. In the passage on akrasia with regard to *thumos*, Aristotle takes a different perspective than in his discussion of akrasia with regard to things such as money and honor. In this context, he is not addressing the nature of the desired objects themselves but rather the way in which a person is directed towards those objects. Appetite is a desire for objects as pleasurable; *thumos* pertains to objects in a different way.

In what way does *thumos* pertain to objects, then? Unfortunately, Aristotle does not provide a definition of *thumos*, and he does not explicitly explain what the general objective of this kind of desire is. *Thumos* is at any rate not a desire for things insofar as they are pleasurable or insofar as they are good, for those objectives are related to appetite and rational desire, respectively. Aristotle does state that, like appetite, *thumos* is a kind of desire that we in general share with non-rational animals (III.2.1111b12-13). He mentions, for example, that it is *thumos* that drives 'wild animals that

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Neoptolemus does not appear to regret his action of telling the truth. For more on inverse akrasia, see Chapter Three.

rush at the people who have wounded them' (8.1116b26). It is thus a *non-rational* desire. Further, Aristotle often mentions *thumos* in connection with things such as anger, revenge, and retaliation (see for example 1117a7 and VII.6.1149a32). However, *thumos* has a wider scope than this, for Aristotle also mentions it in connection with love and friendship, for example (*Politics* VII.7.1327b40-1328a5).

Klaus Corcilius' discussion of *thumos* and, as we may call it, '*thumotic* akrasia' is highly illuminating, and in the remainder of this section I shall by and large follow his interpretation of Aristotle's views about these matters. Corcilius suggests that *thumos* has to do with how one relates to other people, other life forms, and lifeless goods, which include both competitive and positive relations (2008a, 148). He furthermore observes that the relevant examples that Aristotle provides all involve a relation that is either being disturbed or restored (2008a, 151). In line with these observations, I believe it is warranted to describe Aristotle's concept of *thumos* in terms of a desire that is in general aimed at restoring and maintaining relations in the form that a person perceives as natural and appropriate.[21]

Corcilius proposes that on Aristotle's view *thumotic* akrasia is less bad than appetitive akrasia because *thumos* in general is closer to reason than appetite is. If *thumos* is indeed concerned with relations, this means, according to Corcilius, that it requires more complex perceptual abilities than those that are strictly necessary for appetitive desire, for the relational objects towards which *thumos* is directed are not objects of direct perception but can only be established through some kind of *interpretation* of the type of situation (2008a, 143). For example, a touch on the arm may be a pleasurable tactile experience by itself, but it can be experienced as friendly or hostile depending on how a person perceives his relation to the person doing the touching. Since Aristotle maintains that *thumos* is a non-rational desire, such a complex perception need not be based on rational abilities or arguments. However, Corcilius emphasizes that *thumos* nevertheless requires

21 Charles concludes from Aristotle's discussion of *thumotic* akrasia that *thumos* is instead aimed at justice and value (2011, 197-198). Aristotle indeed refers to justice in this context and claims that *thumotic* akrasia is less unjust than appetitive akrasia (*NE* VII.6.1149b13-26). The reference to justice is compatible, however, with the more general picture of *thumos* as a desire concerned with setting relations right.

a complexity that is not open to lower life forms, whereas appetite in a basic form still is (2008a, 141). If this is indeed Aristotle's view, *thumos* is in general a step closer to reason than appetite is because it requires more complex perceptual abilities and interpretation.

Importantly, Corcilius maintains that this way of understanding Aristotle's view is confirmed in his discussion of *thumotic* akrasia. Let me stress that in the relevant passage Aristotle talks about *thumos* in the context of lack of control. So the question of interest is how the passage shows that *thumos* is closer to reason than appetite is, even in cases in which a person's behavior is not in line with reason due to *thumos*. The most crucial part of the passage runs as follows:

> …one's thumos in such cases [akratic cases] seems to hear what reason says, but to mishear it, like hasty servants who run out of the room before they have heard everything being said to them and then fail to carry out the instruction, and as dogs bark just at a sound, before discovering if it's a friend who's there; just so a hot and quick nature means that thumos hears – but does not hear the order, before rushing to vengeance. For reason [logos], or sensory appearances [phantasia], indicate "unprovoked aggression" or "insult"[22], and thumos, as if having reasoned it out that this sort of thing is cause for going to war, moves into angry mode at once; whereas appetite only needs reason [logos] or perception [aesthesis] to say "pleasant" for it to rush off to enjoy it. So thumos follows reason in a way, but appetite does not. (NE VII.6.1149a25-b2)[23]

This passage reveals that the main problem with *thumotic* akrasia is that the person's deliberation is overhasty. Corcilius concludes that in *thumotic* cases, the akratēs acts on incomplete knowledge rather than a total absence of knowledge (as in impulsiveness) or against knowledge (as in weakness) (2008a, 144, n.21; cf. Charles 2011, 198).[24] He points out that both the

22 These are examples of competitive relations only. I am not sure whether Aristotle considers *thumotic* akrasia with regard to positive relations impossible, or whether he simply does not mention any example of this.

23 I have adapted Rowe's translation of this passage and have replaced 'temper' with *thumos*.

24 Both Natali (2009b) and Pearson (2012, 137) emphasize the 'as if having reasoned

example of the barking dog and the example of the hasty servant illustrate that in the case of *thumotic* akrasia a person assumes knowledge that he cannot yet have (2008a, 144). The dog *interprets* the knocking on the door as coming from a foe, although he cannot yet know whether the person knocking is friend or foe. The hasty servant *interprets* the situation as one in which his master has already told him what to do, but no definite order has been given yet. When *thumos* leads a person astray, complex forms of perception and interpretation are thus involved, whereas Aristotle indicates that with appetite the direct perception of something pleasant suffices ('appetite only needs reason or perception to say "pleasant" for it to rush off to enjoy it', *NE* VII.6.1149a35-b1). Corcilius points out that the *thumotic* akratēs' response to the situation is not entirely without rational justification, however (2008a, 146). If one is insulted, for example, it is perfectly appropriate to become angry. The problem is rather that a person too hastily perceives something as an insult even though he cannot yet know whether an insult has indeed been given. With *thumotic* akrasia, a person too hastily assumes that something is the case and acts on this assumption instead of waiting to see what is truly going on and what an appropriate response would be.

Hence, appetitive akrasia and other negative character traits that revolve around appetite violate the criterion of rationality more strongly than *thumotic* akrasia does. This is because *thumos* is in general closer to reason than appetite is, since it requires more complex perceptual abilities and interpretation, and because the *thumotic* akratēs does not act against or without knowledge of reason's prescription but rather acts on the basis of incomplete knowledge. He assumes knowledge that he could not yet have and acts on it. The *thumotic* akratēs is not as bad as the akratēs who gives in to appetite, however, for his response would have been warranted if he had correctly established the knowledge he now presupposes.

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it out'-part of this passage. They hold that according to Aristotle in cases of *thumotic* akrasia something analogous to a reasoning process takes place, whereas in cases of appetitive akrasia it does not. I think it is unlikely that the difference between the two lies here. Aristotle appears to sketch parts of a so-called 'appetite-based syllogism' in his discussion of akratic action in *NE* VII.3 (1147a33-b2). This is in any case what alternative interpretations of *NE* VII.3 claim.

5.4 Final remarks

In *NE* VII.4-10, Aristotle draws up a hierarchy of character traits by comparing how ill-disposed akrasia as such makes a person in comparison to various other character traits. This reveals which factors he deems relevant to establishing the moral status of akrasia. On Aristotle's account, morally relevant and demarcating factors coincide. This leads Aristotle to restrict the sphere of akrasia to food, drink and sex, for example. The complete list of factors that I have distinguished in Aristotle's work is as follows: 1) how strongly (or rather weakly) the akratēs' rational desire has been cultivated, and consequently whether there can be a direct or only an indirect confrontation between reason and appetite, 2) whether reason is healthy, corrupt or absent, 3) how (un)natural it is for a human being to desire the objects of affect, 4) whether the objects are pursued because of seeking pleasure or avoiding pain, and 5) whether the lack of control is due to appetite or to *thumos*, or, in other words, whether it involves acting against knowledge that one has or could in principle have, or whether it instead involves acting on incomplete knowledge.

Aristotle's view on the moral status of akrasia as a character trait is also relevant to developing a contemporary character account of akrasia. This is not to claim that we should follow his account in every respect. He puts nail biting in the same class as cannibalism, for example, even though the first is relatively innocent compared to the latter. Moreover, Aristotle limits the domain of akrasia as such to the sphere of food, drink, and sex, even though other forms of lack of control can be equally interesting. As I argued in Chapter Three, however, Aristotle *is* correct when he observes that the kinds of objects over which a person is disposed to lack control matters for moral evaluation. And, in a similar vein, each of the criteria for morally evaluating the akratēs that Aristotle distinguishes can be redescribed in a way that fits in with contemporary discussions on akrasia.

In more contemporary terminology, the morally relevant factors that Aristotle distinguishes may be fruitfully redescribed as follows: 1) how strong a judgment-contrary motivation it takes for the akratēs to give in, and in what form(s) a person's akratic character typically manifests itself, 2) whether or not a person forms judgments in a sound way, and whether

he is sufficiently capable of rational deliberation at all, 3) which kind of objects the akratēs is disposed to lack control over, 4) whether someone is actively attracted to the akratic alternative or whether he instead gives in to competing motivation in order to avoid discomfort or a painful experience, and 5) whether the akratēs acts in a way that he would never judge as best with regard to this kind of situation or whether he acts on an overhasty conclusion but in a way that he would judge best if the situation were as he, at the moment of action, prematurely assumes.[25]

In the previous two chapters, I presented Aristotle's character account of akrasia. The fact that he regards akrasia primarily as a character trait means that, according to him, it is both stable and long-lasting and makes someone ill-disposed in several respects. These two features provide an outline for his entire discussion of akrasia: after introducing the topic and the issues that it raises in *NE* VII.1-2, he addresses the symptoms through which the character trait reveals itself in *NE* VII.3 and then goes on, in the remainder of the discussion, to consider its moral status.

In the final two chapters, I follow the division between the two features that Aristotle ascribes to character traits. I address further challenges to the conception of akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait in Chapter Six, and I discuss akrasia in relation to moral responsibility in Chapter Seven.

25 As I argued in Chapter Three, repetition can be added to this list of morally relevant factors for evaluating akrasia. Since it was common in Aristotle's time to think of akrasia as a character trait, or in any case as a stable condition, he probably took this for granted.

6. AKRASIA AND THE PROBLEM OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT[1]

6.1 Introduction

In the literature on character education, some authors – such as Howard Curzer, Kristján Kristjánsson and Wouter Sanderse – identify akrasia as one of the stages in their (neo-) Aristotelian models of character development. Their prime concern is to describe how a person's character can develop from the lowest moral level via other stages – most notably akrasia and enkrateia/self-control[2] – to full virtue.[3] They do not deny that a person's development can stagnate at a stage that falls short of the moral ideal. Curzer, for example, writes that 'although some people at each stage of moral development eventually progress to the next stage, and some deviate from the moral development path, most people at each stage simply fail to move up' (2002, 155; cf. Kristjánsson, 2007, 20).[4] Nevertheless, their work suggests the image of akrasia as a stage in the development of character because the focus lies on means of improvement. Moreover, they discuss akrasia with a hopeful tone: '…they [people who are at the level of akrasia] have made a

1 This chapter is an adapted version of Paulien Snellen (2018).

2 Curzer and Kristjánsson include other intermediate stages as well: the stage of the generous-minded and the stages of softness and resistance, respectively. I stick with the four stages that are mentioned in all three models, including Sanderse's.

3 The general idea is that to become virtuous a person must move through the stages in a sequential order. However, the character educationists allow for the possibility of a person's jumping from one level to another right away, or a person's skipping a stage entirely (see for example Kristjánsson 2007, 22).

4 Curzer (2018) is concerned with formulating a fine-grained list of character flaws rather than construing a general model of moral development.

giant leap on the path to moral virtue' (Sanderse 2015, 389; cf. Curzer, 2002, 161, n.38 and Kristjánsson, 2007, 21).

In this dissertation, I primarily regard akrasia not as a stage in the development of character but as a character trait that is stable and long-lasting (or stable for short). Of course, akrasia might be stable for some people and a stage in a developmental process for others. The claims made in the literature on character education and the character approach to akrasia for which I have been arguing are not incompatible. The main focus and the central question are opposed, however. The literature on character education does not shed light on how akrasia can be a stable state because it focuses on the question of how one can surpass this stage. If we take the possibility that akrasia can be a stable character trait seriously, then, in comparison to the character educationist's prime concern, the inverse question arises, namely: how can we understand, on conceptual grounds, how akrasia does *not* develop into self-control *or*, alternatively, degrade into vice?

One might expect that a person with an akratic character – an akratēs – will (eventually) change, for this type of person is typically displeased with the way he acts. He has a judgment about what it is best to do in a particular situation[5], but – in trait-relevant situations – he fails to act in line with this better judgment due to a competing motivation. There are two ways in which the akratēs can try to resolve the conflict: he can alter his standards for action, or he can alter his behavior. Character educationists would obviously recommend the latter because it would bring a person one step closer to the moral ideal of virtue. They consider the problem of character development a moral issue, which makes sense given the virtue ethical context of their

5 Recall that to connect to the contemporary literature on akrasia, I relax Aristotle's demand that a person on the level of akrasia has objectively true knowledge of what the right thing to do is. What matters most on my account is that someone is himself strongly convinced of his better judgment. Akrasia still differs from the stage of the generous-minded person in Curzer's developmental model (2002, 156) because people's convictions at the level of akrasia are firm, not vague. Jan Garrett rightly points out that people with unstable convictions can also struggle to abide by their better judgment (1993, 188). With regard to such people I would say that the path to self-control and virtue requires them not only to align their behavior with their better judgment but also to develop firmer and clearer standards for action.

project. However, even if one is not interested in development towards virtue or in *moral* development at all, the question nevertheless arises of why the akratēs does not alter his standards for action or his behavior. I explore several possible ways to understand why the akratēs does not necessarily change either of these.

I take as a starting point the distinctive features of the concept of akrasia. As before, I focus on developing a *conceptual* analysis of akrasia as a stable character trait, since such an analysis is lacking in the literature. Some of the conclusions that I draw may be empirically testable, but as I pointed out previously it is not my aim to map the relevant empirical literature. This conceptual analysis may, however, provide leads for interdisciplinary and empirical researchers when they study the empirical reality of akrasia as a stable character trait.

I start with a discussion of three features of akrasia that give rise to the belief that it is a stage in a developmental process (6.2). I then try to make sense of the stagnation of the akratēs (6.3). I first argue that, although habits are bound to play a big role in this, they do not provide an entirely satisfactory answer. Secondly, I rely on the analogy that Aristotle draws between akrasia and epilepsy, which I discussed in Chapter Four. Inspired by this analogy, I argue that people can endure internal conflict and regret because these may not be permanently present. I then turn to Amélie Rorty, who explains that akratic habits are particularly tough to break when akrasia has social and political sources. Finally, I consider what these theoretical considerations might imply for the practice of character development and therapy (6.4).

6.2 Reasons to expect the akratēs to change, for better or worse

There are reasons to believe that akrasia is likely to develop towards self-control or decline towards vice. This has to do with the fact that a person who is on the level of akrasia by his very nature a) is characterized as having an internal conflict, b) regrets the way in which he typically acts, and c) is

likely to have knowledge of the kinds of contexts in which he is prone to violate his better judgment.

Before I continue, let me first make a remark on the category of vice. Jan Garrett argues that Aristotle often contrasts virtue not with vice but rather with the concept of 'the Many' (*hoi polloi*).[6] The class of the many is broader than that of vice. It includes vice, but also other conditions that are radically flawed but not wholly bad, such as being uncommitted altogether rather than being committed to the wrong goals (1993, p. 171).[7] For this reason, Curzer, Kristjánsson and Sanderse name the first developmental stage 'the many', and not 'vice' as one might expect. The distinctive features that the character educationists attribute to this category are a lack of commitment to virtue, having unstable convictions and not being able to identify virtuous actions correctly. I rely mostly on the first two features, which are formal, and less on the third, which is related to content. However, I continue to use the term 'vice' to denote the category just below akrasia. Let me stress that I have an Aristotelian notion of vice in mind here.[8] I do not refer to people

6 Garrett points out that for Aristotle, 'the Many is a majority defined by moral-psychological characteristics' (1993, 175); it does not have anything to do with numbers.

7 Vice forms a subclass of the many that is characterized by an inability to be moved by a fear of punishment to change one's behavior (see Garrett 1993, 179 and Curzer 1998).

8 There appears to be an inconsistency in Aristotle's account of vice. In the largest part of his work, most explicitly in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) Book VII, he contrasts vice with akrasia by stating that, unlike the latter, the former is not accompanied by conflict and regret. In *NE* IX.4, however, he says that the souls of bad people are 'in a state of faction' and that the vicious are 'full of regret' (1166b20 and 1166b25). Despite the fact that some authors have offered detailed interpretations of this inconsistency (see for example Thomas Brickhouse 2003 and David Roochnik 2007), I am not sure what to make of it. As Julia Annas pointed out at the Jubilee Centre's 2016 conference 'Cultivating Virtues', much more work needs to be done on the Aristotelian notion of vice, and indeed on vice in general. Perhaps Aristotle is admitting in *NE* IX.4 that, like the akratēs, the vicious can experience internal conflict because sudden arousal can conflict with a more long-standing desire. Or he might be stressing that the goals of the vicious are unstable because they pursue what they desire the most and their desires change all the time. Alternatively, he could have in mind the observation that a vicious person can be tormented by insatiable desires. In any case, Aristotle does not seem to allow for a notion of vice in which the vicious person himself recognizes that what he strives for is bad. His main concern in *NE* IX.4 – which forms part

who know that what they are doing is evil and do not care (although such a form of wholehearted badness would definitely count as vice, should it exist). When I talk of vice, I am instead thinking of people who act under the influence of a tendency to base their better judgments and (more general) standards for action directly on their desires or on whatever suits them best at the time.

The first reason to think that akrasia is a stage in a developmental process is that its main characteristic is having the experience of an *internal conflict* – a conflict between a judgment about how it is best to act and a motivation to act otherwise. Internal conflict seems to point to instability rather than stability. Self-control is also characterized by internal conflict. The crucial difference is that in the case of self-control the better judgment leads to action, whereas in the case of akrasia the competing motivation wins out. In contrast to the self-controlled person, the akratēs therefore dislikes the consequences that the internal conflict has for the way in which he is inclined to act. For this reason, it is hard to imagine how the internal conflict of the akratēs can be permanent.[9] It is natural to seek to resolve any incongruity, but especially one that troubles a person repeatedly and of which he has a clear idea what the outcome should be. Ideally, the akratēs solves his internal conflict in favor of the option he deems best. However, he might not manage to change his behavior. In that case, he might take the other option to rid himself of his internal conflict: giving up on the standards for action that he struggles to live up to. Hence, it seems that the akratēs is likely not to put up with his characteristic internal conflict permanently, since there are two ways he can resolve the tension.

Secondly, akratic actions are typically accompanied by *regret*, and this brings high hopes for improvement. On Curzer's Aristotelian model

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of a larger discussion on friendship – is to point out that vicious people are no friends to themselves and are miserable.

9 A similar question can be asked with respect to self-control (see Carol Gould 1994). However, I would say that it is less astounding that the internal conflict at the level of self-control can be permanent, since the self-controlled person can be pleased with the fact that he manages in the end to combat judgment-contrary motivation successfully.

of character development, it is the painful feeling of regret[10] – a rough translation of the Greek *aidōs* – that drives a person to move upwards from akrasia to self-control: 'Regret's role must be to motivate the performance of virtuous acts which eventually become habitual' (1998). This is not necessarily Curzer's view, for his main aim is to accurately describe Aristotle's account. However, Kristjánsson and Sanderse also adopt this idea as part of their neo-Aristotelian models of character development (2007, 35-36 and 2015, 389-391). In comparison to self-control, what is lacking at the level of akrasia is a habit of acting in the right way. In order to acquire a new behavioral habit, a person needs to perform the right actions. Curzer states that regret functions as a 'catalyst' in this process. Regret is a reaction of disapproval to bad behavior. It also has the prospective function of warning against performing actions that are wrong (2002, 159-160). The painful sting of regret might in itself be reason enough to avoid acting in a similar way in the future, but it also helps a person to recognize when he has acted wrongly in the past or when he is on the brink of doing so. The feeling of regret can thus steer someone in the right direction.

If the akratēs fails to improve his behavior, however, there is also reason to believe that the painful feeling of regret may lead him to slip from akrasia to vice. Luc Bovens' (1999) philosophical discussion of akrasia and therapy exemplifies this. He actually recommends the strategy of changing one's judgment to remedy akrasia. He is inspired by an amusing 'advertisement' for a 'cure' for akrasia by Roy Sorensen (1997; see also Tamar Gendler 1998). In a humorous tone, Sorensen proposes that people pay him a certain amount of money, which he will then return to them if they act against their better judgment. The suggestion is that the action ceases to qualify as akratic because the refund provides a person with a good reason for acting as he does. Bovens considers this kind of strategy seriously. The key, according to him, is to 'raise the utility of what would otherwise count

10 Contrary to Burnyeat (1980), Curzer (1998 and 2002) argues that the path to virtue is painful, according to Aristotle. Perhaps it is not Aristotle's view, but we should not rule out the option that positive feelings can stimulate development as well, such as the pleasure of receiving a compliment or being proud of having gotten it right. Kristjánsson remarks that 'Aristotle probably saw a place for both pleasure and pain in the habituation process' (2007, 36). I focus on regret here because of the direct link with akrasia.

as akratic acts' (1999, 234).[11] The strategy does not simply come down to accepting one's motivation for what it is. According to Bovens, it involves the manipulation of one's environment or personal identity, for example (1999, 234). Interestingly, Bovens recommends this strategy because he finds the alternative – attempting to change one's behavior – hard and not much fun: '…to me it feels like reason whipping the living daylights out of passion' (1999, 232). He says that a person who tries to avert the threat of akrasia by attempting to change his behavior embraces weight, whereas a person who does so by attempting to adapt his better judgment embraces lightness (1999, 235). By this I understand Bovens to mean that he prefers the latter strategy of coping with akrasia because it seems to be free of pain. And regret, I would like to stress, is one of the forms this pain might take. Hence, in order to avoid experiencing regret, someone who suffers from akrasia can come to adjust his standards for action and justify the way in which he is inclined to act.

There is a third reason to think of akrasia as a stage in a developmental process. It is plausible that the akratēs *knows that he has an akratic character*. As Aristotle says, unlike vice, akrasia does not go undetected by its possessor (*Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) VII.8.1150b37). The feeling of regret also testifies to the akratēs' self-knowledge. The fact that someone feels badly about the way he has acted reveals that he knows he acted wrongly (even if only after the fact). Importantly, the akratēs typically acts against his better judgment more than once. Some of the better judgments that he violates might be unique to a particular situation, but others will represent a more general standard for action. An akratēs can, of course, fail to recognize the pattern in his behavior even if he observes (some of) his akratic actions separately. However, I am most interested in akratic people who *do* connect the dots. It is possible for an akratēs to note which standards for action he is likely to violate and which objects and opportunities commonly trigger his akratic actions. This self-knowledge might help an akratēs to take the necessary precautions to develop a self-controlled character.

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11 Bovens writes that a person who applies this strategy, for example, could 'come to construct an identity that places a disvalue on prudence and a value on spontaneity' (1999, 234) or could 'let passion surreptitiously form a pact with reason' (1999, 235).

But, again, in the absence of progress, having the self-knowledge that one is prone to akrasia brings with it the risk that a person takes a step down on the developmental ladder. It is painful to endure the thought that you disapprove of your character. Curzer remarks that people who are akratic 'sometimes pretend to be members of the many because they prefer to be perceived as people who are not trying to be moral rather than people who are failing to be moral' (2002, 158).[12] I would like to add that this pretense can turn into something real over time. A person can become convinced that he really does approve of his actions. Furthermore, the self-knowledge that he has a tendency to act in a certain way can lead the akratēs to come to see his behavior as evidence of what he really judges best. When a person repeatedly violates the same standard for action, he is likely to wonder at some point whether he sincerely endorses that standard. Now, revisiting a better judgment can sometimes help a person to discover that he appreciates something else more highly. Akrasia can occasionally lead to new and better insights, and thereby to a rational revision of one's judgment.[13] However, when someone changes his convictions precisely *because* he tends to act in a certain manner, this strongly indicates that the result is not a rational change of mind but a transition to vice. Hence the self-knowledge of the akratēs can lead to a change of judgment because a person can come to see his behavior as an indication of his true conviction.

All of the above-mentioned features of akrasia can be expected to induce the akratēs to alter his behavior. If his behavior does not improve, however, the very same features can also lead him to change his standard for action instead. There is therefore ample reason to expect that akrasia will either develop into self-control or degrade into vice.

12 Curzer also observes that '[t]he many often pretend to be incontinent because incontinence is more respectable than choosing to act wrongly' (2002, 158). This goes to show that people tend to try to cover up their faults.

13 For discussions of this idea, see Xavier Vanmechelen (2000, 302-308), Martin Seel (2001, 618), Annemarie Kalis (2011, 161-164), and Sabine Döring (2010, 296-299).

6.3 Understanding the stagnation of the akratēs

Despite the reasons to believe that akrasia is a stage in a developmental process, experience seems to indicate that it is actually often persistent. Moreover, I showed in the previous chapters that Aristotle – on whose work the character educationists named above build – primarily regards akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait. How can we understand how akrasia can remain a stable state?

The answer seems clear: an akratēs does not easily change his character because his akratic *habits* are too well entrenched. On the one hand, there is the habit of acting in a certain way. This keeps in place judgment-contrary motivation and behavior. On the other hand, there is the habit of forming certain kinds of better judgment.[14] This prevents the akratēs from heading further in the direction of vice. From the perspective of the akratēs, it is the first type of habit that needs to be changed. He is already convinced that he should act differently than he actually does. Instead, the problem seems motivational. However, as Aristotle observed, habits are like a second nature and are hard to change (*NE* VII.3.1147a23 and 10.1152a30-33).

At first glance, an explanation of stability in terms of habits might seem like a tautology. 'Habit', however, can refer to more than the plain observation that behavior is stable because it has often repeated itself. The term helps to capture what keeps repetitive behavior in place. It might help to think of habits as pathways in a forest, for example. If a certain route is taken often, a path becomes marked out. Once a path has been created, it is the easiest way through the forest. Likewise, when a person has acquired a habit of acting in a certain way, he has performed a certain type of behavior so often that it is difficult to avoid taking the motivational path that has been created.

Creating new motivational pathways takes much time and repetition. Some character educationists are mainly concerned with the character development of children, whose constitution is not yet entirely settled

14 Perhaps some people would be reluctant to call this a habit, since it concerns an epistemic state. I merely want to point out that a person's tendency to form a certain kind of better judgment, just like the inclination to act otherwise, may be stable.

(Kristjánsson, 2007, 22 and Sanderse, 2015). In the case of the young, the mechanisms described in the previous section might be relatively successful in helping them to surpass an akratic or akratic-like stage.[15] However, the constitution of adults who are prone to violate their better judgment is likely to be more deeply settled. Having an akratic character trait is tragic. By the age at which a person develops a conviction on the basis of which he disapproves of his inclination to act a certain way, the behavioral habit is likely to have already firmly taken shape.

Whilst the explanation of the akratēs' character stagnation in terms of habits rings true, it is nevertheless not entirely satisfactory. The question remains how the habits that are expressive of the character trait can stay well entrenched given the above-mentioned reasons to believe that akrasia is likely to change. After all, habits can be broken. It is easiest to keep to the beaten track, but it is not impossible to stray from the trail. Recall that factors other than character can influence action, such as a person's attentional condition.

Moreover, as I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, it is plausible for conceptual reasons that akrasia has a specific sphere. If akrasia displayed unity along the lines of full virtue, the akratēs would achieve nothing that he set out to do, and it is doubtful whether he would be sufficiently rational to be considered a person. An akratēs might compensate for his akrasia in one sphere (say, food) with the control he possesses in another sphere (say, keeping promises) (cf. Chrisoula Andreou, 2010).

Furthermore, self-control is also not entirely lacking *within* the 'akratic domain'. Someone who suffers from akrasia with regard to alcoholic drinks, for example, can manage to decline having another drink on more than one occasion, for otherwise he would be dead drunk most of the time (assuming here that he is not an alcoholic, for that would be a different matter). Hence, in order to develop a self-controlled character, the akratēs need not start from scratch. Habits surely play an important role in accounting for the stability of akrasia, but they do not tell the whole story. Again, how can we

15 On the other hand, Aristotle says that young people are like akratic people in the sense that they 'have a tendency to be led by the emotions' (*NE* I.3.1095a4). If Aristotle is right, young people are vulnerable to akrasia because they could simply get stuck at this stage.

make sense of the fact that internal conflict, regret and self-knowledge can fail to urge the akratēs onwards?

Let me start with the question of how akrasia can be permanent given the *internal conflict* that the akratēs typically experiences. There may of course be people – such as artists and Nietzscheans – who would embrace their conflicted nature. This does not apply to the akratēs, though. The akratēs holds that he should act otherwise than he is disposed to act. He can acknowledge that this condition is typical of him, but it goes too far to say that the akratēs actually endorses this aspect of his character.

Secondly, a person's character could be stable in the sense that it is consistently inconsistent. The akratēs' character might display continuity precisely through permanent internal conflict. The psychologist William Swann (1996) has developed a theory – based on empirical research – that can help to explain how this might work.[16] He argues that people with low self-esteem find it difficult to achieve higher self-esteem despite a strong desire for positive evaluation because maintaining low self-esteem coheres with their self-image. According to Swann, a person's drive for self-coherence can prevail over a desire to improve. A similar explanation may account for why akrasia can remain stable. Suffering from a conflict at one point in time and again at another point in time can constitute a coherent self-image. It may be a drive to preserve this self-image that keeps the internal conflict of the akratēs alive. Further empirical research is needed to establish whether this is the case, but there is a conceptual reason to doubt that such a Swann-inspired explanation applies to akrasia. The experience of internal conflict may indeed confirm the negative self-view of the akratēs, but the akratēs cannot escape the fact that at the same time it also brings to the surface his wish to change his akratic nature. The internal conflict inherently questions the akratēs' character. It is therefore not self-evident that a drive for self-coherence can account for the stability of akrasia as a character trait.

Aristotle's analogy between akrasia and epilepsy, discussed at length in Chapter Four, provides a clue to a different answer as to why internal conflict can fail to prompt the akratēs to change. Recall that according to Aristotle, akrasia is like epilepsy in that it is 'a non-continuous way of being as

16 I thank Kristján Kristjánsson for having mentioned Swann's work to me.

one shouldn't be' (*NE*VII.8.1150b35). An epileptic is ill all the time, but the symptoms of the illness show only now and then. If akrasia is like epilepsy in this respect, it follows that on Aristotle's account akrasia is a stable condition of which the characteristic symptoms are only temporarily and occasionally present. This means that the internal conflict that is so characteristic of akrasia is itself not permanently present and only arises in trait-relevant situations. The akratēs, then, does not necessarily experience internal conflict all the time.[17]

The analogy that Aristotle draws between akrasia and epilepsy can help us to see how internal conflict can fail to establish any change in the akratēs. True, a person could make use of the time between trait-relevant situations to take precautions that prevent repetition of akratic behavior. However, the crux is that at such moments the symptomatic features of akrasia are not there; that is, there is at that time no internal conflict asking to be resolved. One might, after acting akratically, intend to do better next time but not feel an urge to take immediate precautions. After all, right now nothing much seems to be the matter. Hence, the akratēs might fail to improve because, when it is most convenient for him to try to prevent future akratic actions, he is not constantly reminded via internal conflict of his tendency to violate his own better judgments. Similarly, this might be what prevents the akratēs from declining. There is no pressure to reconsider one's standard for action when judgment-contrary motivation is absent. In this context, the akratēs has no trouble hanging on to (or perhaps restoring) his conviction about how it is best to act. Hence, one way to understand the stability of akrasia is to note that the uncomfortable internal conflict that is essential to this state is not constantly present.

A similar explanation might help us to see why *regret* is not necessarily enough to get the akratēs to alter his ways. A person is likely to experience regret over his akratic action. This can sting a lot at the time of action or

17 As I discussed in Chapter Four, there is much dispute about whether Aristotle allows for the akratēs to experience internal conflict at the moment of action. If not, I would say that the akratēs can still become aware of the conflict between better judgment and contrary motivation right before or immediately after the action. See also the discussion in Chapter Three of the distinction between strict and non-strict manifestations of akrasia as a character trait.

immediately after, but the painful feeling might fade away quickly. Of course, regret can sometimes be tenacious. People whose akrasia leads to adultery or to causing a fatal accident, for example, might have to live with regret about their akratic behavior every day, for the rest of their lives. However, if a person's akrasia instead involves something like eating a piece of chocolate, the painful feeling of regret might not linger for very long. It is not that the akratēs no longer disapproves of his action. It is just that he might not be reminded of it by means of a constant feeling of regret. The regret might return every time the akratēs thinks about his akratic behavior, although it could become less intense over time. The point is that it need not be a lingering feeling of regret that brings back the memory. When regret indeed fades away following the akratic action, this also helps to understand how the akratēs can resist changing his standard for action to avoid pain. There are moments of relief between separate akratic actions, and this gives the akratēs time to reinforce his convictions and confirm that his standard for action has not changed. Furthermore, the akratēs might find the idea of the alternative to pangs of regret even more painful. He could realize that it is irrational to change his better judgment simply because of what he is most motivated to pursue. A second way to understand the stability of akrasia, then, is that each time a person acts akratically regret does not necessarily stick around long enough to establish change.

Thus far, I have argued that internal conflict and regret often fail to have a transforming effect on akrasia because they may be relatively short-lived. Does the same line of thought apply to the *self-knowledge* of the akratēs? As I argued above, it is plausible that the akratēs is acquainted with the particulars of his akratic character. There is a possible link between this self-knowledge and regret. Curzer in any case holds that regret (or shame) can help to explicate self-knowledge and make it salient (2002, 160). So perhaps the akratēs fails to benefit from his self-knowledge when there is no feeling of regret in between trait-relevant situations to remind him of this knowledge. However, I am not sure whether this is the case. The feature of self-knowledge differs from the features of internal conflict and regret because it is not (a direct associate of) a symptom of the stable condition of akrasia but rather an awareness of having this condition. This awareness

need not diminish when the characteristic symptoms of akrasia are no longer present.

Amélie Rorty offers a different explanation of how akrasia can remain a stable and long-lasting character trait. She points to social and political sources in order to argue that akratic habits are particularly hard to break.[18] The core of her view is that '[s]ocial institutions and economic systems encourage and foster the very actions that they also condemn' (1997, 652). She gives the example of Daemona, a stockbroker who trades in short-term securities. Daemona values helping the infirm and elderly as a volunteer, but against her convictions she at the same time tricks her fellow volunteers into making risky investments for her own personal gain. Although Daemona believes that what she is doing is wrong, she fails to live up to her social ideals and gives in to the attractions of a luxurious lifestyle, the latter being encouraged, among other things, by 'mass media, television dramas, songs, and advertisements' (1997, 653). Rorty's argument entails that social institutions and other elements of public life tend to sustain the different sides of the kind of internal conflict that is characteristic of akrasia.[19] For behavior to qualify as akratic, it is important that a person has internalized the values that he violates. But if this criterion is met, the picture that Rorty sketches can make sense of many of the common examples of akrasia. Think of examples concerning alcoholic drinks, for instance. Health institutions recommend limiting one's alcohol intake. This reinforces a standard of not drinking too much and strengthens specific judgments, for example the judgment that one should only have one drink at the party tonight. At the same time, there may be pressure from peers to drink because drinking is considered a social activity, not to mention the many commercial images that promote alcohol consumption. This supports the judgment-contrary motivation side of the akratic conflict. With these factors in play, it is hard for the akratēs to adapt his behavioral patterns, for the attractiveness of the tempting option

18 Her undertaking is Aristotelian in nature, for as she observes 'Aristotle locates his ethics within the frame of his politics' (1997, 646).

19 Rorty does not mean to take away a person's own responsibility for his akratic actions. She emphasizes that, despite their social and political origin, akratic actions can still be considered voluntary (1997, 645).

is repeatedly confirmed in public life. Societal structures also prevent the akratēs from changing his standards for action, for they regularly remind him of his convictions. One way to understand how the akratēs' self-knowledge can fail to help him to change, then, is Rorty's idea that at least some of the contexts in which the akratēs is vulnerable to akrasia are themselves strongly embedded in societal structures.

6.4 Some thoughts on therapy

What does all this imply for people with an akratic character who want to make an effort to improve? This is the kind of question that the character educationists I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter are interested in. My suggestions on therapy are meant to supplement their ideas about character development, and are specifically concerned with overcoming the character trait of akrasia.

When it comes to people with an akratic character, Rorty concludes that '[t]he long-range solution for their endemic akrasia rests with political and economic reform' (1997, 657).[20] Change in social and political circumstances could be helpful to people with an akratic character. If the conditions under which a person is prone to violate his judgment no longer obtain, then he will no longer be triggered to act akratically. Furthermore, if the changed circumstances stimulate the akratēs to act repeatedly in ways that differ from his previous patterns of behavior, this might also help him to form new and improved motivational pathways.[21] Social and political reform

20 Rorty holds that knowledge of the social and political sources of akrasia can also help a person to counteract their effect (1997, 657). I think she has in mind something similar to what I said about the self-knowledge of the akratēs: it can provide a person with the knowledge of which contexts he had better avoid. Rorty warns, however, that knowledge of the sources of akrasia can also lead a person to 'self-deceptively disown their akratic actions' (1997, 657).

21 The akratēs might not manage to internalize the new practice sufficiently, however. This would make him vulnerable if social and political conditions were to change once again. The person has truly improved only when his new behavioral patterns are paired with the right internal motivation.

thus seems like a good solution (provided it is the right kind of reform). Unless it is a collective process, however, this solution seems unlikely, for a person cannot change social and political structures on his own, let alone customize them to his own specific needs.[22]

Another option could be to attempt to get a painful feeling like regret to linger, especially after the internal conflict of akrasia has disappeared. A person might try to create a painful feeling that reminds him to take steps toward progress, even though this comes with the risk that the pain will become too much for him and that he will find a solution in a change of judgment instead. Although Luc Bovens would not choose this strategy for himself, he points out that one could try to bind oneself – as Odysseus literally did to protect himself from the sirens' song – to resist enticement. If you want to quit smoking, for example, you are advised to 'tell all your friends that you are quitting smoking: there is plenty of disutility in the shame of lighting up that first cigarette' (1999, 231). In this way, you may make use of your environment to exercise self-control, not by relying on larger societal and political structures for change but by, for example, counting on supportive friends to remind you of your resolution. Creating painful experiences is an unpleasant way to achieve positive change, but it should not be surprising that this is what it takes for the akratēs to improve. Kicking a habit that is both deeply entrenched in one's character and supported by elements of public life that are strongly embedded in societal structures is no easy task. This is made more difficult when the person who must undertake the task is not exactly brimming with self-control.

6.5 Conclusion

The way in which some character educationists present akrasia suggests the image of a stage in a developmental process. There is indeed reason to believe

22 Rachel McKinnon and Mathieu Doucet claim that the best chance of improvement for an akratēs lies with 'random features that permeate our lives' and 'apparently irrelevant features external to decisions' (2015, 66). This does not help an akratēs, however, who wants to take matters into his own hands.

that internal conflict, regret and self-knowledge will urge the akratēs towards self-control or, alternatively, towards vice. Nevertheless, it seems that akrasia can be a stable and long-lasting character trait. Akratic habits may account for this to some extent, but how can these habits themselves remain fixed? Internal conflict and regret are distinguishing features of akrasia, but these features may not be constantly present. In the absence of the uncomfortable and painful experience that they cause, an akratēs can easily get away with an intention to do better next time without immediately taking precautions to prevent future akratic action. When regret is absent, this might also explain why the akratēs' knowledge of the particulars of his condition is not salient to him at times when he could take precautions. However, self-knowledge need not diminish as internal conflict and regret fade away. Rorty argues that akrasia can have social and political sources. This may explain why knowledge of one's akratic character can fail to induce change, for if Rorty is right, improving one's character requires changing not only personal structures but also societal ones.

The arguments presented above suggest that it is hard to change one's akratic character, but whether akrasia is indeed a state that often stays fixed is an empirical matter. It seems to always be possible for an akratēs to eventually move on or deteriorate. What I have shown, however, is that akrasia's remaining a stable and long-lasting state is indeed quite *conceivable*, and that it can thus pose a serious obstacle to further developing one's character.

7. PROSPECTS FOR AKRASIA AS A CHARACTER TRAIT AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I took a closer look at how akrasia can be a stable and long-lasting character trait. In this final chapter, I consider in relation to akrasia the other feature that Aristotle attributes to a character trait, namely that it is a moral notion. I discussed Aristotle's view on the moral status of akrasia as a character trait in Chapter Five. Here, I consider a more fundamental question: why believe that the akratēs is susceptible to moral evaluation at all? More particularly, what grounds do we have to assume that the akratēs is morally responsible in relation to akrasia and that akrasia as a character trait is not instead a form of compulsion or automatic routine for which people are *not* commonly thought to be morally responsible?

My aim here is not to develop a full theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs but to present prospects for developing such a theory. The reason for this restriction is that I am first and foremost interested in the moral aspect of akrasia as a character trait and not in moral responsibility as such. I refrain from comparing different kinds of moral responsibility theories and from specifying details such as what exactly the akratēs is morally responsible *for* (for example, his akratic character, his akratic actions, or both). Rather, I wish to inquire into which feature(s) of the akratēs' condition are likely to play a role in considerations about moral responsibility.

The topic of moral responsibility and akrasia – whether or not it is further identified as a type of action or as a character trait – has received ample attention in the philosophical literature. The two concepts are tightly

connected. On the one hand, akrasia can be thought of as a touchstone of a sound theory of moral responsibility. A theory of moral responsibility that does not accommodate akrasia is arguably too narrow. On the other hand, moral responsibility is typically in some way part of the definition of akrasia. On an action approach, for example, this is often captured by stating that akratic actions are *free*.[1] Akrasia is thus commonly *defined* as falling within the scope of moral responsibility. However, this does not yet make it intelligible *why* moral responsibility would pertain to akrasia. To safeguard the concept of akrasia from skeptics, the concern is therefore to find a criterion by which to distinguish akrasia from other types of actions or conditions – such as compulsion or addiction[2] – in relation to which people are *not* commonly thought to be morally responsible.[3]

I take as a point of departure a version of this concern that comes specifically with regarding akrasia as a character trait. This takes the form of the so-called 'automaticity challenge'. The challenge arises because a person who acts from a character trait allegedly responds to trait-relevant situations in certain ways immediately. The question is, then, in what way character traits differ from mindless habits. If character traits turn out to be mere automatic routines that resemble the motions of arational animals or machines, it seems illegitimate to base attributions of moral responsibility on them. In order to resolve this issue and set character traits apart from other conditions, it is not uncommon to define them as, for example, intelligent conditions (John Doris 2002, 17) or conditions that are reasons-responsive (Kristján Kristjánsson 2010, 27). In view of such a 'rational' feature, character traits are eligible as grounds for moral responsibility. It is not immediately clear that an akratic condition can live up to this part of the definition of

1 On an action approach, attention to moral responsibility usually does not stem from an interest in akrasia as a moral problem, though.

2 It is often assumed by philosophers that addiction is a form of compulsion. Annemarie Kalis points out that psychologists, on the other hand, commonly think of addiction and compulsion as separate conditions (2011, 123-128). For a more detailed discussion of addiction and compulsion, see Neil Levy (2010).

3 See for example the articles on recklessness, weakness, and compulsion by Gary Watson (1977), Jeanette Kennett (2001), and Michael Smith (2003).

a character trait, however, as it is a paradigm example of *ir*rationality. The automaticity challenge hence at the same time puts into question whether an akratic condition can qualify as a character trait and whether it is something in relation to which people can justifiably be held morally responsible.

I therefore especially set out to explore whether it is plausible that an akratic condition can be sufficiently intelligent or reasons-responsive to serve as a ground for moral responsibility. First, I address Julia Annas' attractive solution to the 'automaticity challenge' for virtue (7.2). She draws an analogy between virtue and a certain type of practical skill to show that virtue is not a mindless habit but is very much an intelligent condition. I argue that this 'skill analogy' is unfortunately not applicable to akrasia, but that it nonetheless reveals two preconditions for a theory of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition. Such a theory must be able to deal with both the typical disharmonic nature of akrasia and the kind of historical development that is likely to be involved in acquiring an akratic character. Secondly, I argue that the leading theory of moral responsibility in the contemporary literature – John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's account of moral responsibility – provides promising leads for meeting these two preconditions (7.3).

7.2 Annas' skill analogy and akrasia

In her book *Intelligent Virtue* (2011), Julia Annas addresses the 'automaticity challenge' for virtue. The challenge is constituted by the fact that virtue is said to be the product of habituation, and the virtuous person supposedly acts in a virtuous way immediately. Annas argues that virtue is nonetheless an intelligent condition[4] by showing that it is analogous to a certain type

4 Annas actually uses the term 'disposition'. She stresses, however, that 'although it is natural for us to think of a virtue as a disposition, we should be careful not to confuse this with the scientific notion of a disposition, which just is a static lasting tendency' (2011, 8). In order to avoid the connotation of the scientific notion, I prefer the terms 'condition' or 'stable condition' over the term 'disposition'.

of skill.[5] The crux of her theory is that virtue comes about and functions in a similar way as practical skills that are all too familiar, such as playing the piano, building, or practicing a sport.

Annas holds that, like a practical skill, virtue involves first of all the 'need to learn'. It is not something a person is simply born with but must instead be acquired through practice (although of course some people have more natural talent for certain practical skills or virtues than others). At first, learning a skill requires conscious thought. The novice piano player has to think explicitly about basics such as where to put his fingers, how to play a scale, and so on. He improves by doing it over and over again (2011, 13-14). Similarly, it takes repeated effort for a person to acquire virtue. He must learn to feel, think and act in appropriate ways, and this 'requires time, experience, and habituation' (2011, 14).

Like expertise in a practical skill, virtue on Annas' view also involves 'understanding what you do, self-directedness, and a drive to improve' (2011, 27). She calls this combination of elements the 'drive to aspire'. Through constant and ongoing repetition, the expert pianist has acquired the skill of piano playing. He need not consciously think about how to play the piano anymore, but the result is not mere routine in the sense of mechanical repetition. The expert pianist can teach the skill to others and his play is flexible and innovative. Annas stresses that for the expert pianist 'the result [of constant repetition] is not mindless routine but rather playing infused with and expressing the pianist's thoughts about the piece' (2011, 13-14). The virtuous person has mastered virtue in a similar way. He no longer needs to consciously think about how to respond to a situation. He does not simply copy a teacher or a role model but appropriately adapts his response to the situation. Moreover, he has come to understand *why* certain responses are appropriate, and he is able to articulate this, for example, in teaching others or when asked to. The virtuous person has acquired a condition 'not just to act reliably in certain ways but to act reliably for certain reasons' (2011, 27). Virtue is an intelligent condition because the virtuous person has learned

5 The skill analogy originally stems from Aristotle. See Daniel Russell (2015) for a discussion of Aristotle's comparison between virtue and practical skills such as playing a musical instrument or building a house.

through repetition to act immediately on reasons that he finds suitable.

Annas argues that the skill analogy can be extended to vice as well (2015). She has an Aristotelian notion of vice in mind here. This entails that a vicious person acts as he thinks he should but is mistaken about which goals it is good to pursue. She acknowledges that whereas people become virtuous by striving to be virtuous (or, in any case, to be generous, just, and so on; Annas 2011, 74), it is inconceivable that people would strive to become vicious (2015, 98). Nonetheless, she points out that it is possible to acquire a vicious character in the same way that virtue is learned: by gradually becoming better at what one is aiming for. For example, a vicious person may have learned 'to make money in ways not guided or restrained by honesty' (2015, 103) and to be good at it. The skill analogy is thus applicable not only to the morally perfect character trait of virtue but also to the morally negative character trait of vice.

Can the skill analogy also be used in relation to the morally negative character trait of akrasia? Note that the skill analogy works for virtue and vice insofar as these are character traits that have developed through learning how to act for reasons that a person finds suitable. It is unlikely that an akratic condition has this kind of past, though. Granted, it is *possible* that the sort of development captured by the skill analogy is part of the history of an akratēs. For example, what a person views as worthy of pursuit in the early stages of his career may differ from what he values later on. He may first enthusiastically and actively learn to act for certain reasons and only later come to prefer acting for other reasons. It is, however, *improbable* that this is how akrasia usually comes about. Virtue and vice on the one hand and akrasia on the other hand are importantly different. Virtue and vice – at least on an Aristotelian model – are both characterized by harmony between reason and (motivation for) action. Akrasia, on the other hand, typically involves disharmony between the reasons that a person judges it best to act on and the reasons or motivations that actually tend to influence his behavior. It is therefore much more likely that the history of an akratēs will be characterized precisely by a *failure* to learn to act for the reasons that he finds suitable. If this is correct, a conscious effort to achieve what one aspires to is not commonly part of developing an akratic condition. The akratēs can, of course, have aspirations, but this would be an aspiration to change his

behavior, not to reinforce it. Because of its typical disharmonic nature, then, it is implausible that akrasia has the kind of history that matches with the skill analogy.

As it stands, the skill analogy cannot help to show that a condition like akrasia is sufficiently intelligent or reasons-responsive to serve as a basis for the attribution of moral responsibility.[6] Nevertheless, the discussion of the skill analogy teaches us that a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition, and thus also an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, must meet two preconditions: a) it must be able to deal with the typical disharmonic nature of akrasia and b) it must be able to deal with the kind of history that likely comes with acquiring such a condition.

7.3 Fischer and Ravizza's account and akrasia as a reasons-responsive condition

With these two preconditions in hand, I now turn to John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's leading account of moral responsibility, as presented in their book *Responsibility and Control* (1998). I first present the main aspects of Fischer and Ravizza's account of moral responsibility. I then show that their account offers promising leads for meeting the two preconditions described above.

Fischer and Ravizza do not themselves provide an account of akrasia. However, their theory of moral responsibility can help us to understand the grounds on which akrasia can be seen as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition. This is important, for as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, such a 'rational feature' can provide a promising basis for a sound theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs.

Fischer and Ravizza's account is notable because it bases moral responsibility not on a principle of alternate possibilities but on 'guidance control'. This means that, according to their view, a person need not have

6 Annas' skill analogy does not seem to cover the development of all virtuous and vicious character traits either. See, for example, Nancy Snow (2016) for a discussion of two other ways in which virtue – or at least states that are very near to virtue – might develop.

control in the sense of being able to do otherwise at the actual moment in order to be morally responsible for an action (or omission, consequence, and so on). With the help of what they call 'Frankfurt-type examples'[7], Fischer and Ravizza illustrate that guidance control is the relevant sort of control for moral responsibility. Consider Sally, who is taking driving lessons and is directing her car to the right as instructed. Had she not turned her car to the right, her driving instructor would have steered the car in that direction anyway. In the actual situation, however, there is no such intervention. The point is that even though Sally lacks the power to do differently, she guides the car to the right herself. Fischer and Ravizza conclude that Sally is morally responsible for steering the car to the right precisely because she herself guides her performance.

Fischer and Ravizza's concept of guidance control rests on two pillars. The idea is that a person has guidance control (that is, is morally responsible) when the mechanism[8] that leads to, for example, an action is a) moderately reasons-responsive and b) the agent's own. These two pillars, so I argue, fit nicely with the two above-mentioned preconditions that a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition, and thus also an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, must meet.

7.3.1 Moderate reasons-responsiveness and the disharmonic nature of akrasia

Reasons-responsiveness is the first of two key aspects of Fischer and Ravizza's account of moral responsibility. Their view on this notion offers a way to meet the first precondition, which concerns the disharmonic nature

7 Fischer and Ravizza name this type of example after Harry Frankfurt, who introduced them into the contemporary literature on moral responsibility.

8 It is difficult to avoid talking of mechanisms in relation to Fischer and Ravizza's view, as they conceive of their account as a 'mechanism-based' approach to moral responsibility. At the same time they are not all too attached to the term 'mechanism'. They write that we could also talk of 'the process that leads to the action' or 'the way the action comes about' (1998, 38). Examples of mechanisms are practical reason, habits and traits.

of akrasia. Let me point out that this part of their account not only fits a character approach to akrasia but is of equal interest to an action approach. Whether akratic actions are considered as single and isolated cases or as part of a pattern, the disharmony between better judgment and action forms a vital part (note, though, that on a character approach this disharmony can be seen as a mere symptom of an underlying condition). The main thing that I want to point out in this section is that the two components of Fischer and Ravizza's notion of moderate reasons-responsiveness – regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity – map well onto the two sides that constitute the characteristic disharmonic nature of akrasia.

Fischer and Ravizza consider three different forms of reasons-responsiveness: strong, weak, and moderate. They settle on the last option and, interestingly, one of the reasons for this is that moderate reasons-responsiveness does not exclude akrasia. Fischer and Ravizza start by discussing *strong reasons-responsiveness* and write that it entails 'a tight fit between the reasons there are and the reasons the agent has, the agent's reasons and his choice, and his choice and action' (1998, 42). As I discussed in Chapter Two, presupposing such a strong connection between reason, choice/motivation, and action rules out akrasia. Fischer and Ravizza see this too. They use akrasia as one of the touchstones of a sound theory of moral responsibility – in this case, in particular, of the element of reasons-responsiveness. The notion of strong reasons-responsiveness excludes akrasia, and Fischer and Ravizza reject this strong notion as a suitable component of a theory of moral responsibility in part because of this (1998, 42 and 68).

Secondly, Fischer and Ravizza turn to a *weak* notion of *reasons-responsiveness*. They maintain that this notion simply requires 'that there exist *some* possible scenario (or possible world) in which there is a sufficient reason to do otherwise, the agent recognizes this reason, and the agent does otherwise' (1998, 44). They hold that this description of reasons-responsiveness is already fruitful, and I will return to it. Moreover, they point out that it properly ascribes moral responsibility in relation to akrasia. The problem with the weak notion, however, is that it 'becomes so loose that it also ascribes responsibility to agents who act on mechanisms that respond only in unusual or incoherent ways' (1998, 68). For example, on a notion of weak reasons-responsiveness we can hold someone responsible who judges

that a thousand dollars for a ticket to a basketball game is too expensive but two thousand dollars is not. Clearly, a person who responds coherently would conclude that two thousand dollars is in this case also too expensive. Hence, we may wonder whether the person in the example is sufficiently capable of responding in a coherent way, such that we can ascribe moral responsibility to him. In response to this problem, Fischer and Ravizza conclude not that what is formulated in the description of weak reasons-responsiveness is false, but that a notion of reasons-responsiveness that is adequate for a theory of moral responsibility requires something in addition.

This prompts Fischer and Ravizza to develop a *moderate* notion of *reasons-responsiveness* that consists of two components: 'regular reasons-receptivity' and 'weak reasons-reactivity' (1998, 82). Basically, the latter component corresponds to their earlier description of weak reasons-responsiveness, and the first component can be considered additional. It is in virtue of this distinction, as I show in a moment, that Fischer and Ravizza's account can deal well with the disharmonic nature of akrasia. They do not explicitly observe this themselves. As noted above, they refer to akrasia as a touchstone of their account. They do not ask what the account can in turn teach us about the grounds of moral responsibility in relation to akrasia. The division between regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity can shed light, however, on how moral responsibility can go together with the disharmonic nature of akrasia.

By reasons-*receptivity*, Fischer and Ravizza mean 'the capacity to recognize the reasons that exist' (1998, 69). They hold that moral responsibility demands *regular* reasons-receptivity, where 'regular' is to be understood along the lines of orderliness or regularity (1998, 71, n.12). They state that regular reasons-receptivity 'requires a pattern of actual and hypothetical recognition of reasons that is understandable and minimally grounded in reality' (1998, 76). If someone finds a thousand dollars for a ticket to a basketball game too expensive, one would expect him to also find two thousand dollars too much. In other words, the reasons for action that a person acknowledges must be intelligible.

By reasons-*reactivity*, Fischer and Ravizza mean 'the capacity to *translate* reasons into choices (and then subsequent behavior)' (1998, 69). They argue, though, that moral responsibility requires only *weak* reasons-reactivity.

According to them, a mechanism need not *actually* react to reason in order for a person to be morally responsible for it, as long as the mechanism has the *general capacity* to do so. We already briefly encountered this idea in Fischer and Ravizza's description of weak reasons-responsiveness. In the context of the moderate notion, they further describe their view on weak reasons-reactivity as follows:

> Our contention […] is that a mechanism's reacting differently to a sufficient reason to do otherwise in some other possible world shows that the same kind of mechanism can react differently to the actual reason to do otherwise. This general capacity of the agent's actual-sequence mechanism – and not the agent's power to do otherwise – is what helps to ground moral responsibility. (1998, 73)

In other words, if there is at least one possible scenario in which a person would react to a reason that he sees as a sufficient reason to do otherwise, this shows the mechanism to be weakly reasons-reactive.[9] According to Fischer and Ravizza, for example, the fact that a person in an alternative scenario would react to the reason not to buy a chocolate bar because it is too expensive indicates that the operating mechanism has the general capacity to react in the actual situation to this person's reason not to buy the chocolate bar because he judges it best to eat snacks that contain less sugar.

What is striking is that the division between regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity relates to the different sides of akrasia. Regular reasons-receptivity relates to the judgment side of akrasia. Someone who fails to abide by his judgment may in principle also err in identifying the best reasons for action, but this is not what the akratēs is commonly criticized for. The process of judgment formation typically functions just fine in the case of this type of person. To the extent that the akratēs indeed forms sound judgments, the mechanism that leads to his typical behavior can be considered regularly reasons-receptive.

9 Note that this does not require that a person actually be able to do otherwise in the given situation. The possible scenario need not be genuinely open to a person at the actual moment. It rather functions as an epistemic condition for learning whether the operating mechanism has the general capacity to react to any incentive to do otherwise (cf. 1998, 45).

Weak reasons-reactivity relates to the motivation/action-side of akrasia. Fischer and Ravizza in fact provide an example to illustrate how akrasia (or to be more precise, the mechanism that leads to akratic behavior) can be weakly reasons-reactive. They introduce us to Jennifer[10], who attends a basketball game despite of judging it best to stay at home and work on a paper with an oncoming publication deadline. Fischer and Ravizza state that '[e]ven though Jennifer is disposed[11] to be weak-willed under some circumstances [as in the example], there are other circumstances in which she would respond appropriately to sufficient reasons' (1998, 45). According to Fischer and Ravizza, there is at least one possible scenario in which Jennifer would refrain from going to the basketball game and instead work on her manuscript. They suggest that if 'Jennifer is told that she will have to pay one thousand dollars for a ticket to the game […], she presumably would not go to the game' (1998, 45). Fischer and Ravizza hold that the fact that there is a possible scenario in which Jennifer reacts to *a* reason that she considers a sufficient reason to do otherwise indicates that the operating mechanism has the general capacity to react to the *actual* reason to do otherwise. Hence, they maintain that the mechanism leading to Jennifer's akratic behavior is weakly reasons-reactive.

It is helpful that Fischer and Ravizza explicitly mention akrasia in the context of weak reasons-reactivity, but the Jennifer example also raises important questions. First of all, just how representative is the example? Does it show that in all instances of akrasia the operating mechanism is weakly reasons-reactive? The structure of Jennifer's case is quite conventional, and it is formulated broadly enough to possibly include both strict and non-

10 Fischer and Ravizza actually talk about Jennifer in relation to weak reasons-*responsiveness*. As I mentioned above, however, in the context of moderate reasons-responsiveness the description of weak reasons-responsiveness is pretty much replaced by the component of weak reasons-*reactivity*, so the example of Jennifer is relevant in relation to weak reason-reactivity as well.

11 I suspect that by 'disposed' Fischer and Ravizza mean that akrasia is a *dispositional* or *modal* property of Jennifer (cf. 1998, 53). They do not further explain whether they prefer to regard akrasia as a single and isolated type of action, a character trait, or both.

strict versions of akratic behavior.[12] However, this does not guarantee that, as in Jennifer's case, for every instance of akrasia there is at least one other relevant possible scenario. Another option, and I believe this is rather what Fischer and Ravizza have in mind, is to consider this element essential to akrasia.[13] On their account, the criterion of whether or not there is at least one possible scenario in which a person would react to a sufficient reason to do otherwise is one of the criteria that help demarcate akrasia from other types of actions or conditions for which people *cannot* justifiably be held morally responsible.

This brings me to a second issue that the Jennifer example brings to the fore: under what conditions is a possible scenario a *relevant* possible scenario? I am not sure, for example, why Fischer and Ravizza consider relevant the other possible scenario they describe in relation to Jennifer. For the factor that would bring Jennifer in the possible scenario to refrain from attending the basketball game has nothing to do with her judgment that it is best not to go because she needs to work at home on an important manuscript. In the possible scenario, she would stay at home because the tickets are too expensive. Unfortunately, Fischer and Ravizza remain quite vague about what counts as a relevant possible scenario and why.

Fischer and Ravizza do provide *some* further information about what a possible scenario must have in common with the actual situation in order to be relevant for establishing weak reasons-reactivity. First of all, it is clear that on their account the possible scenario does not share all the details with the actual situation. Secondly, the world in which the possible scenario takes place must have the same natural laws as the actual world (1998, 44). Thirdly, Fischer and Ravizza state that in the possible scenario 'the same kind of mechanism' must operate as in the actual situation (1998, 51-52). This seems to be all that is required of the possible scenario as far as Fischer and

12 That is, it could cover both cases in which Jennifer clearly has in mind her better judgment that it is best to stay at home and work on the manuscript and cases in which she does not.

13 Recall that moral responsibility is often in some way part of the definition of akrasia. Fischer and Ravizza's account helps to make it intelligible in virtue of what feature moral responsibility could possibly pertain to akrasia.

Ravizza are concerned, though, for they maintain that even the incentive to do otherwise and the particular details of the mechanism may differ from the actual situation (1998, 52).

Fischer and Ravizza do not clarify why it is sufficient that the possible scenario has the same kind of mechanism in common with the actual situation. Why must the incentive to do otherwise not be the same as well, for example?[14] Furthermore, they admit that they 'do not have any general way of specifying when two kinds of mechanisms are the same' (1998, 40).

For a full theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, we would need to develop this issue about possible scenarios in more detail, but I shall let it rest for now. What is most important for my purposes is that the two components of Fischer and Ravizza's notion of moderate reasons-responsiveness – regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity – map well onto the two sides that constitute the characteristic disharmonic nature of akrasia. Fischer and Ravizza's notion of moderate reasons-responsiveness is therefore a promising component of an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs. It offers interesting leads for dealing with the first precondition – that is, the precondition concerning the disharmonic nature of akrasia that, so I argued, a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition must meet.

7.3.2 Moral responsibility, history, and akrasia

Recall that I formulated a second precondition that a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition, and thus also an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, must meet: doing justice to the kind of history that is likely involved in acquiring an akratic condition. The need

14 Also, we may wish to exclude as relevant possible scenarios that are extreme. We could, for example, incorporate Gary Watson's idea that akrasia is relative to some sort of standard of normal self-control, whereas a condition like compulsion, for which a person *cannot* justifiably be held morally responsible, falls outside the scope of what is considered normal human conduct (1977). Jörn Müller (2014) discusses a similar idea.

for this second precondition is reflected in Fischer and Ravizza's account. They hold that for moral responsibility it is not enough that the relevant mechanism be moderately reasons-responsive. They emphasize that it must also be the agent's own. Fischer and Ravizza state in this context that moral responsibility is an 'essentially *historical* notion' (1998, 170). They claim that moral responsibility cannot be read off a person's 'snapshot properties' (1998, 187) but instead depends on the obtaining of certain facts in the past. For example, someone lacks moral responsibility for an action (or consequence, omission, and so on) if it is the product of hypnosis or an unwilling surgery by an evil neurologist.

This part of Fischer and Ravizza's account is therefore better suited to a character approach to akrasia than an action approach, despite the fact that in *Responsibility and Control* Fischer and Ravizza pay more attention to single actions than to trait actions. As I discussed in Chapter Three, in an action approach, with its focus on strict akratic actions, considerations of time are irrelevant. Authors who take an action approach to akrasia are mainly interested in whether or not a person has his better judgment clearly in mind at the moment of action, and they thereby zoom in precisely on the snapshot properties of the action. A character approach, however, naturally comes with an interest in how akratic actions came to be instantiated. As a character trait, akrasia has a certain historical development and manifests itself across time. This resonates with Fischer and Ravizza's view on what makes a mechanism the agent's own.

Fischer and Ravizza hold that for a mechanism to be the agent's own there must be some sort of *process* of taking responsibility for the mechanism (1998, 200 and 207). In general, taking responsibility involves a person's 'recognizing his agency and accepting that he is an apt target for the reactive attitudes on the basis of exercising that agency' (1998, 214).[15] In particular, 'an agent takes responsibility for acting from a particular kind of mechanism' (1998, 215; emphasis removed). Behavior may spring from different sources,

15 Fischer and Ravizza borrow the term 'reactive attitudes' from Peter Strawson. This term captures the idea that 'when we regard someone as a responsible agent, we react to the person with a unique set of feelings and attitudes – for example, gratitude, indignation, resentment, love, respect, and forgiveness' (1998, 5).

such as practical reason or nonreflective mechanisms. A mechanism is the agent's own if he takes responsibility for that which issues from it.[16]

Note that the statement that someone is morally responsible if he sees himself as morally responsible involves a form of circular reasoning. But I believe this is remedied to a certain extent, first of all, by the fact that the subjective element of taking responsibility can only establish moral responsibility in combination with the more objective element of moderate reasons-responsiveness. Fischer and Ravizza observe that the element of taking responsibility is an important addition, though, because *experiencing* oneself as being in control is required for *actually* being in control. Otherwise, so they observe, a person would be 'like a sailor who does not believe his rudder is working; he allows the boat to be buffeted by strong winds' (1998, 221). Secondly, Fischer and Ravizza stress that it is not usually an attractive option to evade taking responsibility: 'Agents who genuinely fail to take responsibility – and thus view themselves as lacking control – are legitimately sequestered from society, and are deprived of the opportunity to participate in the moral community' (1998, 229; see also 217-219). As Fischer and Ravizza conceive of it, the element of taking responsibility therefore does not appear to be redundant.

The question is, then, whether the history of the akratēs involves a process of taking responsibility for the mechanism that leads to his typical judgment-violating behavior. Fischer and Ravizza do not address this, but I believe the answer is affirmative. Let me start by observing that mindless habituation *does* seem to play an important role in developing an akratic condition. In particular, as far as the akratēs' behavioral tendencies and motivational preferences are concerned, he probably did not have much conscious influence on the way these turned out, especially if they developed when he was only a child. The tragedy is, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, that by the age at which the akratēs comes to disapprove of his behavior, (some of) his behavioral and motivational patterns are likely to have already firmly taken shape. However, mindless habituation cannot

16 The agent need not take responsibility explicitly. Fischer and Ravizza point out that a person can have some sort of 'standing policy' with respect to a mechanism (1998, 216).

constitute the whole story of how an akratic condition develops.

Akrasia requires at least *some* amount of reflection. Not every akratēs might reflect very deeply on his behavior, and certainly not all the time. To qualify as an akratēs, however, it is not enough to have certain behavioral and motivational tendencies. It is not even sufficient that these tendencies conflict with a person's better judgment. An akratēs is at least at some point also *aware* of this conflict. The reflective element constitutes his akratic condition. It is due to his knowledge of the judgment-violation that he disapproves of his behavior. The akratēs thus reflects on his behavior at least insofar as he *notices* the discrepancy with his better judgment.

I propose that it is in virtue of this reflective element that the akratēs can be said to take responsibility for the akratic behavior that issues from his character. The key is that the akratēs has a particular view of himself. The behavioral tendencies that are typical of his character manifest across time, and, as should be clear by now, the akratēs typically disapproves of his behavior. It is also not uncommon for this to be accompanied by feelings of regret or shame. In Fischer and Ravizza's terms, we could say that the akratēs has a negative reactive attitude towards himself. This implies that he would consider others justified in also having this or related reactive attitudes towards his character and the behavior that tends to flow from it. If he were not to find this justified, this would raise doubts about the sincerity of his attitude of disapproval, and thus about whether he truly is an akratēs and not instead a vicious person.[17] The akratēs therefore takes responsibility for the relevant mechanism (that is, he makes it his own) by means of noticing his typical judgment-violating behavior and disapproving of it.

With their account of what makes a mechanism the agent's own, Fischer and Ravizza offer a lead for meeting the second precondition for a theory of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition. It brings to the fore the crucial role of the reflective element in the development of an akratic condition. Unlike the virtuous and the vicious person, it is implausible that the akratēs' condition has come about by learning to act for reasons he finds suitable. Rather, the akratēs' condition only fully takes shape

17 Again, I have an Aristotelian notion of vice in mind here, in which the vicious person is mistaken about what appropriate reasons for action are.

when he notices and comes to disapprove of his motivational and behavioral tendencies. Through this kind of process or historical development, he can be said to take responsibility for his akratic behavior. It follows from Fischer and Ravizza's account that the relevant mechanism is the akratēs' own. Their account thus provides a way to incorporate the kind of history that is likely involved in acquiring an akratic condition into a theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs.

7.4 Conclusion

Do we now have the means to face the automaticity challenge to akrasia as a character trait? Recall that if akrasia turns out to be (just) a mindless habit or mechanical routine, the worry is that we cannot ascribe moral responsibility to the akratēs, and it is doubtful whether akrasia can qualify as a character trait.

Julia Annas tries to tackle the automaticity challenge to virtue and vice with the help of the skill analogy. I have shown that this does not work for akrasia, however. The discussion of Annas' work did bring to the fore two preconditions that a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition, and thus also an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, must meet: it must be able to deal with the disharmonic nature that is typical of an akratic condition and with the kind of historical development that is likely to come with it.

Fischer and Ravizza's account of moral responsibility offers leads for meeting these two preconditions. For one, their notion of moderate reasons-responsiveness consists of two components – regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity – that can accommodate the two sides of the disharmonic nature of akrasia. For a full theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, however, the reference to possible scenarios in the component of weak reasons-reactivity needs further specification. Secondly, Fischer and Ravizza's view on what makes a mechanism the agent's own matches well with the plausible historical development of the akratēs. It highlights that by reflecting on and disapproving of his behavior, the akratēs takes responsibility for it. Fischer and Ravizza's account thus provides a promising basis for a

theory of akrasia as a reasons-responsive condition in relation to which the akratēs can justifiably be held morally responsible.

8. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this dissertation was to reintroduce a character approach to akrasia. Is it beneficial to regard akrasia primarily as a character trait? What can a fruitful character account of akrasia look like? What are its advantages and challenges?

I concluded in Chapter Three that there are several advantages to approaching akrasia primarily as a character trait over the common contemporary approach of regarding it as a type of single and isolated action. A character approach takes an inherent interest in the repetitive nature and the moral status of akrasia, and it can take on board all forms of action that are naturally described as failures to abide by one's better judgment, strict and non-strict cases alike. Furthermore, unlike an action approach, a character approach need not concern itself with the logical puzzle of how strict akratic action is possible. Instead, it can focus on the underlying condition of the character trait as such and on non-strict akratic action. It can thereby safely stay away from the discussion on the logical puzzle, which currently seems to have reached an impasse. In the remainder of the dissertation, I have tried to show – building on Aristotle's work – what a character account of akrasia might look like and how further challenges can be met.

A first main theme concerned akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait. It is natural for a character approach to regard akrasia as a condition that can manifest itself in repeated akratic action. However, this also raises a challenge for a character approach. I addressed the question of how we might understand the akratēs' failure to improve his behavior despite the fact that, by his own standards, he should exercise more self-control. Inspired by Aristotle's work, I suggested that the disharmony between reason and

affect (or the conflict between better judgment and competing motivation) that is characteristic of akratic action is likely not constantly present. This implies that there are moments in between akratic actions in which an akratēs is not urged to change his behavior, or not reminded of the need to do so. Furthermore, social and political structures can also contribute to keeping a person's akratic habits in place. As a consequence, it appears that it is hard for an akratēs to change his character.

A second main theme of the dissertation was the moral status of akrasia as a character trait. I related a character trait to a person's morally relevant patterns of feeling, thinking and acting, such as his core commitments, aspirations and ideals. This raises questions, first of all, about the factors that can play a role when we blame someone for being disposed to violate his better judgment. Aristotle, for example, in his evaluation of akrasia takes into consideration morally relevant factors such as the kinds of objects over which the akratēs lacks control and how strong a judgment-competing motivation it takes for the akratēs to give in. Secondly, I discussed the grounds on which the akratēs is susceptible to moral evaluation. I argued that John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's account of moral responsibility provides promising leads in this respect. Their account of moral responsibility can do justice to the disharmonic nature of akrasia and the likely historical development of the akratēs. It is plausible that the akratēs can be held morally responsible in part because he reflects on and disapproves of his akratic behavior.

I have thus shown that it is fruitful to regard akrasia primarily as a character trait. This character approach is of relevance to anyone who is in some way concerned with akrasia, character, or character development. However, I have not exhausted all that there is to say about akrasia as a character trait.

For one, there may be much to gain by looking into empirical research in relation to akrasia as a character trait. I have deliberately not engaged much with the empirical literature because I wanted to focus on philosophical analysis of the character trait. With a better conceptual grasp of akrasia as a character trait in hand, however, it is also easier to know what to look for in the empirical literature. To which spheres does akrasia most commonly pertain? Does the underlying condition of the akratēs typically involve a lasting cognitive deficit, a motivational deficit, or both? How can

an akratēs best try to improve his character? What is the influence of social and political structures on people with an akratic character? (With all of these questions, it would be helpful to have more relevant empirical studies that follow the same individuals over a long period of time.)

Secondly, it would be valuable to study akrasia as a character trait in relation to different branches of virtue ethics or other frameworks of character. What consequences do different varieties of virtue ethics – such as Platonic, Stoic, Confucian, Thomistic, Nietzschean, and neo-Aristotelian – have for a character approach to akrasia? And, conversely, what light does a focus on akrasia as a character trait shed on different theories concerning character? When character is the topic of discussion, virtue is usually central (sometimes along with vice). It might bring with it new perspectives on virtue ethics, however, if we take seriously the idea that a more intermediate condition such as akrasia qualifies as a character trait as well.

Thirdly, it would be intriguing to pay attention to the will in the discussion on akrasia as a character trait. Although akrasia is often translated into English as weakness of will, the will hardly plays a role in the relevant contemporary literature. In ancient Greek literature, including Aristotle's work, a fully developed concept of the will is likewise absent. As Jeanne-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet write: '…we might say that one does indeed find choice and responsibility based on intention in a Greek such as Aristotle but what is lacking, precisely, is will' (1981, 46). In its most extreme form, the will is understood as a faculty that can make decisions in an entirely autonomous way, completely detached from beliefs and desires. On such a conception of the will, akratic action is – as with motivational externalism – no more mysterious than other types of actions, and therefore not of any particular interest. As Jörn Müller (2009) discusses, however, there are plenty of medieval philosophers with a nuanced concept of the will and an interest in akrasia as a character trait (or as some form of stable human condition). It would be fascinating to look into these accounts more closely from the perspective of a character approach to akrasia. For one thing, it could be productive to compare more traditional concepts of the will to related terms in the contemporary literature on akratic action, such as Richard Holton's notion of willpower. I am thinking in particular, however, of the context of sin and evil that medieval discussions of the will and akrasia bring with

them. The context of the will opens up the possibility that an akratēs could act not just on a desire for the lesser good but on truly evil or base motives, which might bear on matters of moral evaluation and prospects for moral development.

Hence, plenty of interesting research opportunities concerning a character approach to akrasia remain. I made a start with what I hope will prove to be a new way of approaching akrasia in the contemporary literature. I have shown that pursuing this line of research and regarding akrasia primarily as a character trait is very much worthwhile.

SUMMARY

The main aim of this dissertation is to reintroduce a character approach to akrasia into the philosophical debate. In *Chapter One*, I explain that the contemporary literature on akrasia is almost exclusively preoccupied with the logical puzzle of how a single and isolated akratic action is possible. This dissertation is deliberately not meant as a contribution to solving this logical puzzle. Although it is an interesting philosophical problem, it fails to address a very significant issue: people can, and typically do, act against their better judgment *repeatedly*. Akrasia especially poses a problem in everyday life when it is recurrent. In this dissertation, I therefore focus on akrasia as a character trait. What might a fruitful character account of akrasia look like? What are the advantages and the challenges of such an account? Building on the work of Aristotle, I show that it is fruitful to approach akrasia as a character trait.

In *Chapter Two*, I address the main positions in contemporary discussions about the logical puzzle of how strict akratic action is possible. The logical puzzle is constituted by the fact that there intuitively seems to be a strong link between evaluation and action (via motivation), yet the experience of strict akratic action – in which better judgment and action clearly come apart – seems real enough as well. There are three types of strategies for solving the logical puzzle, which I illustrate focusing on the accounts of Richard Hare, Donald Davidson and Alfred Mele: (1) denying the possibility of strict akratic action, (2) distinguishing between (processes leading to) a judgment that warrants action and (processes leading to) a judgment that a person violates in acting akratically, and (3) denying that there is a necessary connection between better judgment, motivation, and action. Each of these strategies faces a difficulty, however, that is inherent

to the strategy itself. The first strategy does not truly take the experience of strict akratic action seriously. With regard to the second strategy, the question arises of whether it is really impossible to act against the kind of judgment that supposedly warrants action. And the third strategy, although it can make room for the possibility of strict akratic action, renders the precise relation between better judgment, motivation, and action unintelligible. All three strategies therefore face an inherent problem that seems impossible to overcome entirely.

In *Chapter Three*, I present several advantages of approaching akrasia primarily as a character trait over the common contemporary approach of regarding it as a type of single and isolated action. I argue that a character approach can do justice to akrasia as it is of most concern in everyday life because it takes an inherent interest in the repetitive nature and the moral status of akrasia. Moreover, because it is necessarily stretched out over time, a notion of akrasia as a character trait can take on board all forms of action that are naturally described as failures to abide by one's better judgment. These include not only strict cases but also non-strict cases such as procrastination, temporary judgment shifts, and akrasia through self-deception or rationalization. Furthermore, this fact also allows the character approach to remain agnostic about the logical puzzle. It has the option of focusing on the stable condition of akrasia as such and on non-strict akratic actions. Further, I argue that philosophical situationism – the position that denies that broad character traits are widespread – does not pose a threat to my project about akrasia as a character trait. With the help of arguments by Tom Bates and Pauline Kleingeld, I show that akrasia as a character trait is compatible with the kind of empirical evidence referred to by the situationists.

To explore the details of what a fruitful character account of akrasia might look like, I turn to Aristotle's rich account of akrasia as a character trait. According to him, a character trait is 1) stable and long-lasting and 2) a moral notion. These two features provide an outline for his entire discussion of akrasia as a character trait: after introducing the topic and the issues that it raises in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) Book VII.1-2, he addresses the symptoms through which the stable character trait of akrasia reveals itself in the famous passage on akratic action in *NE* VII.3 and the moral status of akrasia in *NE* VII.4-10.

In *Chapter Four*, I discuss Aristotle's view on akrasia as a stable and long-lasting character trait. On Aristotle's view, the bad aspect of this character trait – the characteristic disharmony between reason and affect – is only present in its temporary and occasional symptoms – that is, akratic actions. I present an interpretation of Aristotle's account in which he distinguishes two kinds of symptoms of akrasia, a non-strict and a strict form (these two forms can be associated with his notions of impulsiveness and weakness, respectively). These symptoms are the manifestations of the underlying, stable and long-lasting condition of akrasia. This stable condition may involve a lasting cognitive deficit, but I argue that the akratēs on Aristotle's account in any case suffers from a permanently overly weak rational desire.

In *Chapter Five*, I address Aristotle's ideas on akrasia as a moral notion. On his account, character traits make a person well- or ill-disposed in light of how strongly they follow or violate a more general criterion of rationality for evaluating character traits. In *NE* VII.4-10, Aristotle draws up a moral hierarchy of character traits. He compares akrasia to various other character traits, such as virtue and vice, but also *enkrateia* (self-control) and softness. This brings to light, first of all, where Aristotle situates akrasia in the moral hierarchy of character traits. Vice is the worst, followed by akrasia. Secondly, it reveals which features he deems relevant for morally evaluating the akratēs. On Aristotle's view, morally relevant and demarcating factors coincide. As a consequence, for instance, he restricts the sphere of akrasia to food, drink and sex. The complete list of morally relevant factors that Aristotle distinguishes in *NE* VII.4-10 is as follows: 1) how strongly (or rather weakly) the akratēs' rational desire has been cultivated, and consequently whether there can be a direct or only an indirect confrontation between reason and appetite, 2) whether reason is healthy, corrupt or absent, 3) how (un)natural it is for a human being to desire the objects of affect, 4) whether the objects are pursued because of seeking pleasure or avoiding pain, and 5) whether the lack of control is due to appetite or to *thumos* – or, in other words, whether it involves acting against knowledge that one has or could in principle have or whether it instead involves acting on incomplete knowledge.

In the final two chapters, I follow the division between the topics of the stability and the moral status of akrasia as a character trait and explore further challenges. In *Chapter Six*, I address how we can understand, on

conceptual grounds, how akrasia can remain a stable state. How is it possible for akrasia *not* to develop into self-control or, alternatively to degrade into vice? I engage with the work of contemporary character educationists. Their work suggests the image of akrasia as a stage in the development of character. There is indeed reason to believe that internal conflict, regret and self-knowledge will urge the akratēs towards self-control or, alternatively, towards vice. Nevertheless, it seems plausible for conceptual reasons that akrasia can be a stable and long-lasting character trait. Akratic habits may account for this to some extent, but how can these habits themselves remain fixed? Internal conflict and regret are distinguishing features of akrasia, but these features may not be constantly present. In the absence of the uncomfortable and painful experience that they cause, an akratēs can easily get away with an intention to do better next time without immediately taking precautions to prevent future akratic action. Furthermore, Amélie Rorty argues that akrasia can have social and political sources. This might explain why knowledge of one's akratic character can fail to induce change, for if Rorty is right, improving one's character requires changing not only personal but also societal structures.

Finally, in *Chapter Seven*, I consider the basis on which akrasia can be thought of as a moral notion. The main worry is that repetitive akratic behavior turns out to be (just) a mindless habit. This would imply a) that we cannot ascribe moral responsibility to the akratēs, and b) that it is doubtful whether akrasia can qualify as a character trait given that it is common to define a character trait as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition. I do not develop a full theory of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, but I discuss the aspects of the akratēs' condition that are likely to play a role in considerations about moral responsibility. I first discuss Julia Annas' view on what makes virtue an intelligent condition, and I then go on to explain why it does not apply to akrasia. It does, however, reveal that a notion of akrasia as an intelligent or reasons-responsive condition, and thus also an account of the moral responsibility of the akratēs, must meet two preconditions: a) it must be able to deal with the typical disharmonic nature of akrasia, and b) it must be able to deal with the kind of history that likely comes with acquiring such a condition. I argue that John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's account of moral responsibility offers promising leads for meeting these two

preconditions. First of all, their notion of moderate reasons-responsiveness consists of two components – regular reasons-receptivity and weak reasons-reactivity – that can accommodate the two sides of the disharmonic nature of akrasia. Secondly, Fischer and Ravizza's view on what makes a mechanism the agent's own matches well with the likely historical development of the akratēs. This reveals that it is plausible that the akratēs can be held morally responsible in part because he reflects on and disapproves of his akratic behavior.

In this dissertation, I do not exhaust all that there is to say about akrasia as a character trait. Plenty of interesting research opportunities remain, some of which I mention in the conclusion. I have shown, however, that regarding akrasia primarily as a character trait is very much worthwhile, in particular because a character approach captures the repetitive nature and moral status of akrasia.

SAMENVATTING: AKRASIA ALS KARAKTERTREK

Stel, je bent van oordeel dat je het beste zuinig met water kunt omgaan, maar toch blijf je telkens weer langer onder de douche staan dan je zelf goed vindt. Dan handel je akratisch, dat wil zeggen, tegen je eigen oordeel in. In de filosofie genereert akrasia twee problemen. Hedendaagse filosofen benaderen akrasia vooral als logische puzzel. Hoe kan iemand op het moment van handelen het ene vinden en toch het andere doen? In de klassieke oudheid en middeleeuwen zagen filosofen akrasia echter vooral als moreel probleem. Ze beschouwden akrasia bijvoorbeeld als een karaktertrek die iemand verhindert om een goed leven te leiden. Ik claim dat het ook in hedendaagse filosofische discussies vruchtbaar is om akrasia als karaktertrek op te vatten. Dit proefschrift heeft dan ook als doel om een karakterbenadering van akrasia te herintroduceren in het filosofische debat.

In het inleidende Hoofdstuk Eén leg ik uit dat de hedendaagse literatuur over akrasia zich vrijwel alleen maar richt op de logische puzzel hoe een singuliere en geïsoleerde akratische handeling mogelijk is. Deze logische puzzel ontstaat doordat er intuïtief gezien een sterke connectie tussen evaluatie/oordeel en handeling (via motivatie) lijkt te zijn. Tegelijkertijd is de ervaring van strikt akratisch handelen – waarbij oordeel en handeling overduidelijk uiteenlopen – ook overtuigend. Dit proefschrift is bewust niet bedoeld als een bijdrage om deze logische puzzel op te lossen. Hoewel het een interessant filosofisch probleem is, laat het ook een belangrijk aspect buiten beschouwing: het is namelijk mogelijk en zelfs typisch voor mensen om *herhaaldelijk* tegen hun eigen oordeel in te handelen. In het alledaagse leven vormt akrasia vooral een probleem als het telkens weer terugkeert. In dit proefschrift concentreer ik me daarom op akrasia als een

karaktertrek. Hoe ziet een vruchtbare karakterbenadering van akrasia eruit? Wat zijn de voordelen van en uitdagingen voor een dergelijke benadering? Voortbordurend op het werk van Aristoteles laat ik zien dat het loont om akrasia als een karaktertrek te beschouwen.

In Hoofstuk Twee bespreek ik de belangrijkste posities in de hedendaagse discussies over de logische puzzel hoe strikt akratische handelingen mogelijk zijn. Er zijn drie strategieën om met deze logische puzzel om te gaan. Ik illustreer deze aan de hand van de toonaangevende theorieën van Richard Hare, Donald Davidson en Alfred Mele. De drie strategieën zijn: 1) ontkennen dat strikt akratische handelingen mogelijk zijn, 2) onderscheid maken tussen oordelen die gegarandeerd tot handelen leiden en oordelen die dat niet doen, zoals bij akratische handelingen, en 3) ontkennen dat er een noodzakelijke connectie is tussen oordeel, motivatie en handeling. Elk van deze strategieën heeft echter een probleem dat inherent is aan de strategie zelf. De eerste strategie neemt de ervaring van strikt akratisch handelen uiteindelijk niet echt serieus. De tweede strategie roept de vraag op waarom akrasia dan niet mogelijk is bij de oordelen die handelen zouden garanderen. De derde strategie maakt weliswaar ruimte voor de mogelijkheid van strikt akratisch handelen, maar tegen de prijs dat de relatie tussen oordeel, motivatie en handeling niet langer inzichtelijk is. Alle drie de strategieën lopen dus aan tegen een probleem dat niet op te lossen lijkt.

In Hoofdstuk Drie presenteer ik de voordelen die het oplevert om akrasia als karaktertrek te beschouwen. Ik beargumenteer dat een karakterbenadering beter aansluit bij alledaagse ervaringen van akrasia, omdat het recht doet aan de repetitieve aard en de morele status van akrasia. Bovendien kan een notie van akrasia als karaktertrek alle vormen van 'tegen beter weten in handelen' omvatten. Daaronder vallen niet alleen strikt akratische handelingen, maar ook niet-strikte vormen zoals uitstelgedrag, tijdelijke oordeelsverandering en akrasia door middel van zelfbedrog of rationalisatie. Ook maakt een karakterbenadering het mogelijk om een agnostische houding aan te nemen ten opzichte van de logische puzzel. Met deze benadering is het namelijk mogelijk om als alternatief te focussen op de stabiele staat van de karaktertrek akrasia als zodanig en ook op niet-strikte vormen van akratisch handelen. Ten slotte betoog ik in dit hoofdstuk dat het

filosofisch situationisme – de positie die ontkent dat robuuste karaktertrekken wijdverbreid zijn – geen bedreiging vormt voor mijn project. Met behulp van argumenten van Tom Bates en Pauline Kleingeld laat ik zien dat de empirische data waar de situationisten zich op beroepen compatibel zijn met akrasia als karaktertrek.

In de volgende twee hoofdstukken bespreek ik Aristoteles' systematische en gedetailleerde benadering van akrasia als karaktertrek. Volgens Aristoteles hebben karaktertrekken, inclusief akrasia, twee eigenschappen: ze zijn stabiel, dat wil zeggen, ze strekken zich uit over de tijd, en ze zijn moreel van aard. In de beroemde passage *Ethica Nicomachea* (*EN*) VII.3 bespreekt hij de symptomen waarin de stabiele karaktertrek akrasia zich kan manifesteren. In de rest van de discussie van akrasia in *EN* VII.4-10 gaat Aristoteles in op de morele status van akrasia.

In Hoofdstuk Vier bespreek ik Aristoteles' visie op akrasia als een stabiele en langdurige karaktertrek. Volgens Aristoteles is de voor akrasia karakteristieke disharmonie tussen rede en affect (in hedendaagse terminologie: oordeel en motivatie) alleen aanwezig bij de tijdelijke en incidentele symptomen van de karaktertrek, dat wil zeggen, bij akratische handelingen. Zoals ik Aristoteles interpreteer, kunnen dit zowel strikte als niet-strikte akratische handelingen zijn, twee vormen die kunnen worden geassocieerd met respectievelijk Aristoteles' noties van impulsiviteit en zwakte. Akratische handelingen zijn daarmee de symptomen of manifestaties van een onderliggende, stabiele en langdurige staat van akrasia. Deze stabiele staat wordt wellicht gekenmerkt door een blijvend cognitief gebrek, maar ik beargumenteer dat volgens Aristoteles er bij de akratēs in ieder geval sprake is van een motivationeel gebrek in de vorm van een rationeel verlangen dat permanent te zwak is.

In Hoofdstuk Vijf bespreek ik Aristoteles' idee dat akrasia een morele notie is. Volgens hem zorgen karaktertrekken ervoor dat een persoon een goede of slechte attitude heeft. Aristoteles hanteert hierbij een algemeen criterium van rationaliteit om karaktertrekken te evalueren. De ene karaktertrek volgt of schendt dit criterium meer dan de andere. In *EN* VII.4-10 schetst Aristoteles een morele hiërarchie van karaktertrekken. Hij vergelijkt akrasia met andere karaktertrekken zoals deugd en ondeugd, maar ook met *enkrateia* (zelfcontrole) en slapheid (waarbij iemand typisch

tegen beter weten in handelt vanwege een verlangen om pijn te vermijden). Dit laat allereerst zien waar hij akrasia plaatst in de morele hiërarchie van karaktertrekken. Ondeugd is het slechtst, direct daarna volgt akrasia. Ten tweede laat Aristoteles' discussie in *EN* VII.4-10 zien welke factoren hij relevant vindt voor de morele evaluatie van de akratēs. Bij Aristoteles vallen de factoren die karaktertrekken van elkaar onderscheiden samen met de moreel relevante factoren. Een van de gevolgen hiervan is bijvoorbeeld dat hij het domein van akrasia beperkt tot het gebied van voedsel, drank en seks. De volledige lijst van moreel relevante factoren die Aristoteles onderscheidt is als volgt: 1) hoe sterk (of, zwak) het rationeel verlangen in het geval van de akratēs is gecultiveerd en, daarmee samenhangend, of het conflict tussen rede en begeerte enkel een indirecte vorm kan aannemen of ook een directe vorm, 2) of de rede gezond, gecorrumpeerd of afwezig is, 3) hoe (on)natuurlijk het is voor een mens om naar bepaalde objecten te verlangen, 4) of de objecten worden nagestreefd omwille van plezier of om pijn te vermijden, en 5) of het verlangen dat een rol speelt bij akrasia de vorm aanneemt van begeerte (*epithumia*, gericht op plezier) of van *thumos* (gericht op menselijke verhoudingen, ook wel in het Nederlands vertaald als 'drift'). Bij begeerte wordt ingegaan tegen praktische kennis over hoe het het beste is om te handelen, waarover iemand op het moment van handelen beschikt of kan beschikken. Bij drift handelt iemand op grond van praktische kennis die incompleet is.

In de laatste twee hoofdstukken ga ik achtereenvolgens in op de stabiliteit en de morele status van akrasia als karaktertrek. In Hoofdstuk Zes behandel ik de vraag hoe we op basis van conceptuele overwegingen kunnen begrijpen dat akrasia een stabiele staat kan *blijven*. Hoe is het mogelijk dat akrasia zich niet verder ontwikkelt tot zelfcontrole, of anders degradeert tot ondeugd? Ik ga in op het werk van hedendaagse auteurs die zich bezighouden met karaktervorming. Hun werk schetst het beeld van akrasia als stadium van karakterontwikkeling. Er is inderdaad reden om aan te nemen dat interne conflicten, spijt en zelfkennis ertoe leiden dat de akratēs meer zelfcontrole ontwikkelt of minder deugdzaam wordt. Desalniettemin is het plausibel dat akrasia een stabiele en langdurige karaktertrek kan zijn. Akratische gewoontes lijken hierbij een grote rol te spelen. De vraag is echter waarom het niet lukt om deze gewoontes te veranderen. Een mogelijke

verklaring is dat hoewel interne conflicten en spijt akrasia kenmerken, deze niet per se continu aanwezig zijn. Als het oncomfortabele en pijnlijke gevoel dat ze veroorzaken er niet is, komt een akratēs er makkelijk mee weg om alleen de intentie te vormen om het de volgende keer beter te doen, zonder gelijk ook voorzorgsmaatregelen te nemen om toekomstig akratisch gedrag te voorkomen. Daarnaast beargumeert Amélie Rorty dat akrasia een sociale en politieke oorsprong kan hebben. Dit kan verklaren waarom de zelfkennis dat je een akratisch karakter hebt niet per se tot verandering leidt. Als Rorty gelijk heeft, zijn er zowel persoonlijke als maatschappelijke veranderingen nodig om vooruitgang te boeken als je een akratisch karakter hebt.

Ten slotte ga ik in Hoofdstuk Zeven na op welke gronden akrasia als morele notie kan worden beschouwd. De grootste zorg is dat repetitief akratisch handelen louter een vorm van gedachteloze gewoontevorming zou zijn. Dit zou inhouden 1) dat we geen morele verantwoordelijkheid aan de akratēs kunnen toeschrijven, en 2) dat de status van akrasia als karaktertrek kan worden betwijfeld, aangezien het gebruikelijk is om een karaktertrek te definiëren als een intelligente houding die ontvankelijk is voor redenen. Ik ontwikkel geen volledige theorie over de morele verantwoordelijkheid van de akratēs, maar laat wel zien welke aspecten van de akratēs' conditie meegenomen moeten worden bij overwegingen omtrent morele verantwoordelijkheid. Ik bespreek eerst wat volgens Julia Annas deugd tot een intelligente houding maakt en leg uit dat dit niet van toepassing is op akrasia. Haar ideeën brengen echter wel twee voorwaarden aan het licht waar een theorie over akrasia als een intelligente houding aan moet voldoen: 1) ze moet kunnen omgaan met de conflicterende aard van akrasia, en 2) ze moet recht doen aan hoe een akratische houding tot stand komt. Ik beargumenteer dat John Martin Fischer en Mark Ravizza's theorie over morele verantwoordelijkheid veelbelovende handvatten biedt om aan deze twee voorwaarden te kunnen voldoen. Allereerst bestaat hun notie van 'moderate reasons-responsiveness' uit twee componenten ('regular reasons-receptivity' en 'weak reasons-reactivity') die tegemoet komen aan de twee kanten van het soort disharmonie of conflict dat akrasia kenmerkt. Ten tweede past Fischer en Ravizza's idee over hoe iemand zich een mechanisme eigen maakt bij de wijze waarop een akratēs zich naar alle waarschijnlijkheid heeft ontwikkeld. Het blijkt aannemelijk dat de akratēs moreel verantwoordelijk

gehouden kan worden, onder meer vanwege het feit dat dit type persoon op zijn eigen akratische handelingen reflecteert en ze afkeurt.

Dit proefschrift vormt een uitgangspunt om in verdere hedendaagse discussies akrasia als karaktertrek te benaderen. Het beoogt niet een uitputtende behandeling te zijn van alles wat er over akrasia als karaktertrek te zeggen valt. Wel toont het aan dat het heel waardevol is om akrasia als karaktertrek te beschouwen, omdat we op die manier recht kunnen doen aan de repetitieve aard en morele status van akrasia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paulien Snellen was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, on April 16, 1986. She studied Philosophy and Dutch Language and Culture at the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen; as an exchange student, she studied Philosophy at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles (under the supervision of Prof. Gary Watson). In August 2012, she obtained her research master's degree in Philosophy (*Cum Laude*), with a thesis on akrasia and procrastination. In September 2012, Snellen started working as a PhD student in the NWO-funded project 'The Moral Relevance of Weakness of Will. A Dispositional Account' under the supervision of Prof. Pauline Kleingeld and Prof. Jeanne Peijnenburg, studying topics such as akrasia, character, and Aristotle's ethics. From August 2017 onwards, she has been working as a program officer and secretary of the Platform Responsible Innovation at the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

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